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Metaphorical Images of Lay Leaders
An Ethnographic–Theological Study of the Lay Leadership
in a Chinese Mandarin Church in Hong Kong

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Thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Theology and Religion

Durham University

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Abstract

Wang Ziyang, "Metaphorical Images of Lay Leaders: An Ethnographic-Theological Study of Leadership in a Chinese Mandarin Church in Hong Kong" (thesis submitted for PhD, May 2025)

This thesis explores the lived theology of leadership within a Mandarin-speaking diaspora church in Hong Kong, primarily composed of mainland Chinese immigrants. Focusing on two generations of lay elders, the research employs ethnographic methods within a practical theological framework to examine how lived experience, scriptural engagement, and the social context shape their perceptions of church and leadership.

The study reveals distinct metaphorical images—such as "Home" and "Soldiers of Christ"—that inform each generation's understanding. The thesis emphasizes the theological significance of these metaphorical images, showing how they derive from biblical faith and inform ecclesial practices. The first generation, influenced by North American Chinese churches, views the church as "Home," emphasizing stability and belonging. Their "Soldiers of Christ" leadership ideal reflects discipline, a mainland China-focused evangelistic mission, and subtle paternalism within a formally collective structure. The second generation, navigating leadership transition and a changing social landscape, envisions a more dynamic, locally engaged church. They challenge the inherited "Soldier" model, preferring a collaborative, vulnerable "sheep leading sheep" approach. These generational continuities and divergences are paradoxically grounded in their shared "Biblical faith," functioning as both authority symbol and theological image source, creating a dynamic interplay between scriptural interpretation and lived experience. Interdisciplinary analysis, engaging Confucian explorations of belonging and reciprocity, organizational leadership theories, and missiological reflections on military metaphors, reveals the complex interplay between lived experience and existing ecclesiological and leadership constructs.

Integrating Dietrich Bonhoeffer's "Christ existing as community" from *Sanctorum Communio*, focusing on "collective person," "vicarious representation," and "objective spirit," the study connects these images with broader Christian tradition, offering a transformative framework for navigating shared leadership, generational transition, and social engagement. Utilizing a revised pastoral cycle methodology and focusing on metaphorical images, the study provides valuable tools for exploring lived faith, contributing to a deeper understanding of lived theology and lay leadership within Chinese diaspora churches. It offers insights for theological reflection, intergenerational dialogue, and transformative practice.

Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my original work, composed entirely by myself. No portion of it has been submitted previously for a degree at this or any other institution.

Statement of Copyright

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Acknowledgement

This thesis represents the culmination of a long journey, one that would have been impossible to complete without the support, guidance, and generosity of many individuals and institutions. While any shortcomings in this work are mine alone, its strengths are a testament to the community that has sustained me.

I wish to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Peter Ward and Dr. Samuel Tranter. Professor Ward's pioneering work in practical theology and ecclesial ethnography provided the very landscape for this inquiry; his insightful guidance, scholarly generosity, and consistent encouragement were indispensable. Dr. Tranter's sharp theological questions and critical feedback consistently pushed me to deepen my analysis and clarify my arguments, particularly in my engagement with Bonhoeffer. I am profoundly thankful for their patience and their unwavering belief in this project.

My sincere thanks are also due to China Graduate School of Theology, where I received my Master of Divinity. Their generous financial and pastoral support made this doctoral journey possible. I am especially grateful for their continued care and prayers, which have been a source of strength and a constant reminder of the community that first nurtured my calling.

This study is, at its heart, about a community of faith. While the conventions of ethnographic research require anonymity to protect those who so graciously shared their lives, my debt of gratitude is immense. To the elders who participated in this research, I offer my profound thanks. Your willingness to entrust me with your stories, reflections, and vulnerabilities was a remarkable act of trust and the very foundation of this work. To the wider community of brothers and sisters, thank you for allowing me to be part of your journey. This thesis is my attempt to faithfully articulate a small part of the vibrant, complex, and deeply held faith that you live out daily. It has been a privilege to walk alongside you in this process of "faith seeking understanding."

Finally, to my family, whose love and understanding have been my constant support, I owe more than words can express.

Christus als Gemeinde existierend.
(Christ existing as Community.)

Abbreviations Used Throughout the Thesis

- GMBC: "Grace Mandarin Bible Church," the pseudonym used for the church studied in this thesis.
- SC: Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 1. Translated by Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens. Edited by Clifford J. Green. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009.

List of the Tables

Table 1. The types of ethnographic data, in page 72.

Contents

Introduction	10
Chapter 1. A Chinese Church at the Crossroads: Understanding Lay Leadership in a Transnational Context	20
1.1 From North America to Hong Kong: Tracing the Roots of GMBC	21
1.2 The “Hong Kong Drifters”: A New Chapter, Familiar Challenges	30
1.3 Amplifying Lay Voices: The Need for a Contextual Theology of Leadership	37
1.4 Crossroads and Emerging Questions: Charting a Path for Research	45
Chapter 2. Methodology: A Pastoral Cycle for Exploring Lived Theologies of Leadership	49
2.1 A Revised Pastoral Cycle for Lived Theology	49
2.2 Faith Seeking Articulation: Accessing Lived Theology through Ethnographic Research	53
2.3 Faith Seeking Collaboration: Navigating the Interdisciplinary Landscape	59
2.4 Faith Seeking Connection in Christ: Navigating Authority and Identity within the Church	63
2.5 Faith Seeking Transformation: Empowering Change within the Community	70
2.6 Research Design	72
Chapter 3. “Home,” “Soldiers,” and the Biblical Foundation: Unveiling the Metaphorical Images of Leadership	83
3.1 “Home”: The Search for Stability and Belonging in a Shifting Landscape	84
3.2 “Soldiers of Christ”: Unveiling the Dynamics of GMBC’s Collective Leadership	103
3.3 Biblical Faith: Both Anchor and Battleground of GMBC’s Leadership	129
Chapter 4. Beyond the Home: Reimagining Belonging in a Chinese Diaspora Church	147
4.1 Constructing “Home”: A Foundational Metaphor for a Church Community	148
4.2 “Home” Reconsidered: A Theological Examination of Church and Leadership	163
4.3 Beyond “Spiritual Rooting”: Confucian Philosophical Lenses on Chinese Diasporic Communities	175
4.4 Beyond “Home”: New Horizons of A Chinese Church Community	183
Chapter 5. The “Soldier of Christ” and the Burden of Leadership: Examining Collective Ecclesial Leadership	186
5.1 Analyzing Leadership Dynamics through Organizational Lenses: From Trait to Shared Practice	187
5.2 Reflecting The “Soldiers of Christ” Image: A Missiological/Historical Reflection	201
5.3 Reimagining Leadership: Engaging with Lynch's “Friendship” Model and its Limitations	212
Chapter 6. Navigating Biblical Faith: Scripture, Interpretation, and Leadership	225

6.1 The Paradox of Biblical Authority: Bridging Belief and Practice	225
6.2 Living Metaphors: Biblical Interpretation in Chinese Christianity	230
6.3 Embracing Interpretive Diversity: A Christocentric Approach	239
Chapter 7. A Living Ecclesiology: Bonhoeffer, Images, and the Transformation of the Chinese Church	246
7.1 Why Bonhoeffer, why <i>Sanctorum Communio</i>	246
7.2 "Christ Existing as Community": Foundations of a Bonhoefferian Ecclesiology	249
7.3 The Power of Images: A Christocentric Approach to Ecclesial Metaphors	265
7.4 Transforming "Home": The Collective Person and the Diaspora Church	272
7.5 Transforming "Soldiers": A Bonhoefferian Vision for Ecclesial Leadership	281
7.6 Transforming the Biblical Faith: Cultivating a Pneumatological Space	294
7.7 Weaving the Threads: Christ, Community, and the Transformation of Leadership	302
Conclusion	304
Bibliography	316
Appendix I: Sample of Participant Information Sheet	330
Appendix II: Sample of Consent Form	332

Introduction

In a hyper-modern metropolis like Hong Kong, the term “elders” appears almost anachronistic. Yet, within this bustling city, a group of Christian elders—professionals, or in local parlance, “societal elites”, with their own families and careers—diligently shepherd a unique Mandarin-speaking church community, distinct from the predominantly Cantonese-speaking congregations. Who are these individuals? What are their lives like? And what is the nature of their service? Join me, a minister of this church, as we explore their lives and roles. In my capacity as a salaried minister, I worked closely with these elders—the dedicated, non-salaried volunteers who form the church's highest governing body. This unique position gave me a front-row seat to their service, a perspective from within their meetings and discussions, yet always as a collaborator accountable to their collective leadership.

Sanctuary in an Office Building: A Sunday with the Elders

It is 8:00 AM on a typical Sunday morning. Navigating the streets between towering buildings, many shops remain closed after the vibrant nightlife of the previous evening. Arriving at a modern office building, the lobby is devoid of the usual weekday rush of professionals. Only a security guard offers a greeting and holds only one elevator open, specifically reserved for a particular group today. Stepping inside, the elevator ascends to the 20th floor. The doors open to reveal a sign on the facing wall: “GMBC Welcomes You.” The door to the church space is already open; unsurprisingly, someone has arrived early, as they do every week. It is Elder Nasos*.¹ Though called “elder,” he is not yet 50 and possesses boundless energy. As he does every Sunday, he wears a simple black suit and white shirt—attire he does not particularly enjoy. Working at a university in Hong Kong, his everyday style is quite casual, except for formal events. This more formal dress is almost exclusively reserved for Sundays. The formal worship service does not begin until 10:45 AM, with the adult Sunday School class commencing at 9:30 AM. However,

¹ Names marked with an asterisk are pseudonyms of research participants (see section 2.6.2).

Nasos*, having no specific duties this morning, arrives early, adhering to a GMBC tradition. This practice also ensures someone is available to handle any unexpected issues or greet early arrivals. While other elders with young children find Sunday morning mobilization challenging, those with older children, like Nasos*, maintain this custom. The church, located in a 20th-floor office space, is modestly appointed with a low ceiling and simple décor. Aside from the minimalist white cross gracing the central platform, the space resembles a school classroom more than a traditional sanctuary. In one corner, Nasos*, whom I greet upon my arrival, browses the church's modest library.

The collection comprises biographies of missionaries like Hudson Taylor, testimonies of Chinese Christian leaders such as Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee, and histories of North American Chinese churches. Chinese translations of works by English and American authors are also included. Many of these, donated by departing members, reflect the congregation's transient nature. Some well-worn volumes, long held by GMBC, include Billy Graham's sermons, works by Rick Warren, Bill Gothard, Bill Hybels and, less frequently, works by authors from other countries. Notably, Dietrich Bonhoeffer is represented with various mainland Chinese and Hong Kong translations of *Discipleship* and several well-used copies of *Life Together*, evidence of past small group study. The majority of the collection consists of Bible study materials, purchased by the church for various groups, particularly campus fellowships, and available for borrowing. Theological texts are comparatively fewer, though a relatively recent set of Timothy Keller's *Center Church*, in both English and Chinese, exemplifies this category. Several well-used Bibles, primarily different printings of the Chinese Union Version, donated by members, are also available for use during services. A large box of pocket-sized New Testaments sits beside evangelistic pamphlets like "The Prodigal Son" and "The Four Spiritual Laws," intended as gifts for visitors and non-Christian friends. Also available are complimentary copies of GMBC's annual publication, spanning recent editions and some dating back over a decade. These publications feature selected sermons, member testimonies, and key articles consistently authored by the elders. Nasos* contemplates the annual publications, perhaps pondering what he should say regarding the future of GMBC as its 30th anniversary in 2025 approaches.

The arrival of successive elevator loads interrupts his contemplation. Greeters, students arriving from university dormitories via the subway, fellow elders, congregants, and their families gradually fill the church. As the program commences, the elders busily welcome everyone. Sunday School lectures, designed for those eager to learn, focuses primarily on biblical books and occasionally incorporates topical studies, such as church history, led by the minister and elders. The main worship service follows. Today's sermon is delivered by another elder, Kyriakos*, in his early forties. He joined the eldership during the Covid-19 pandemic, despite being a GMBC member for nearly 20 years. Preaching is a significant responsibility for the elders, occurring no less frequently than my own ministerial duties. Many in the GMBC congregation are highly educated professionals or possess extensive experience, making them a discerning audience. Furthermore, the sermon, typically exceeding 45 minutes, forms the core of GMBC's relatively simple worship service. Lacking a large choir or elaborate rituals, the service begins. A worship team leads four hymns, a presider guides the scripture reading and announcements, and then Kyriakos* takes the platform. He appears slightly nervous, but the other elders offer encouraging nods and laughter at his jokes, providing visible support. The sermon is well-received. The congregation comprises long-time members and a significant number of visitors from mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore, and North America, often finding GMBC through word-of-mouth or online searches, drawn, in part, by the unique Mandarin-language service.

Following the service, the elders and I (the sole minister at the time), sit at the front, offering prayers for those who wish it—many with long-term needs familiar to the elders. Since the Covid-19 pandemic, on-site communal meals have been suspended, so the congregation disperses for lunch. The elders' wives, however, have already ordered food for their husbands, as a meeting is scheduled for the afternoon. The elders' families, including children, gather around tables near the reception area for a brief, convivial meal. This is a fleeting moment of respite, as a lengthy agenda awaits after the hurried lunch. As the wives clear the takeaway containers, urging us to proceed, the elders and I retreat to the children's room. Pulling up small chairs amidst the toys, we begin our meeting with prayer. Due to

limited space, with the main hall reserved for a young professionals' event later that afternoon, this smaller, more private space serves as our meeting room. While several elders are present, two cannot attend in person: one is caring for a sick family member, and the other is away on a business trip. However, having become proficient with Zoom during the pandemic, they join the discussions remotely via video conference. A full complement of the leadership team is required for these discussions, which encompass significant decisions regarding the church's development, for which they bear ultimate responsibility. Consequently, some discussion points prove challenging, requiring careful consideration and weighing of various options. The sudden entrance of an elder's young child, excitedly showing their father a short video on their phone, provides a welcome break in the otherwise serious atmosphere.

By the meeting's end, the sun has set, and the congregation and elders' families have departed, turning off the lights. Only our group remains, walking down the dimly lit passage toward the illuminated elevator. Crowded into the elevator, we look at one another, having completed another typical Sunday. Yet, as the elevator descends, a moment of shared silence prompts reflection. How did the life trajectories of these individuals intersect here? That story begins nearly 20 years ago.

A Memory with Mixed Emotions

In 2006, I arrived in Hong Kong as a university freshman—in today's terms, a typical “Hong Kong drifter,” though the term was not yet in common usage. Having grown up in mainland China, I found the English-language instruction and the Cantonese-speaking environment deeply challenging. For a time, I experienced significant stress and discouragement. A Christian classmate also from mainland China suggested I accompany him to a Mandarin-speaking Christian church. Initially, I was surprised. My impression of Christianity, largely shaped by films, consisted of Gothic cathedrals, medieval-garbed priests, and rigid doctrines. However, driven by curiosity and a desire for respite, I agreed. To my astonishment, the reality was entirely different. A contemporary stage setting with an electronic keyboard, scripture projected onto a screen, and sermon in a PPT presentation replaced my

preconceived notions. Most notably, the leader, referred to as Elder Elias*, was a professor at my university. The congregation comprised students and faculty from various Hong Kong universities, completely shattering my image of a church.

I subsequently learned of a weekly Bible study group on campus, also led by Elder Elias*, which I joined. There, I connected with other mainland students, including several older graduate students, creating a supportive social circle. One regular attendee later became an elder at GMBC. Through the Bible study, I gained a new perspective on Elias*. He led our studies with evident passion, and I was particularly impressed that his teachings were far from rigid pronouncements. Instead, he used vivid examples, often drawing from his own experiences. His insightful analysis of the human struggles of biblical figures resonated deeply, and he possessed a particular gift for explaining metaphors, such as the tree planted by streams of water in Psalm 1. For someone unfamiliar with scripture, these images provided profound inspiration and encouragement. Under his guidance, I embraced Christianity and became a Christian. As my interactions with Elias* increased, I became aware of his serious and upright demeanor. However, when I missed a critical deadline due to overlooking a department email, I was filled with panic and had no choice but to seek his help. To my surprise, he responded warmly, reassuring me and guiding me through the process of appealing to the university. I gradually learned that such stories were common within our Christian group of mainland students.

As I was studying far from home, my parents were apprehensive about my newfound faith and, in particular, this new church community. During Lunar New Year, they visited me in Hong Kong and joined me for dinner at Elias*'s home. Elias* and his wife annually hosted students and their visiting families, providing an opportunity for deeper interaction. The following Sunday, my parents attended a service at GMBC and were impressed by the message, which affirmed positive virtues and encouraged good character. Finally, during the post-service lunch, as we queued for food, I identified another elder humbly serving us with rice. Explaining that he held a senior executive position at a multinational corporation, I observed a shift in my father's perspective. He expressed confidence in my involvement with the church and encouraged me to learn from these elders.

I followed through on this encouragement, earnestly pursuing my Christian faith throughout my graduate studies at the same university. After graduation, I formally informed Elias* of my desire to pursue theological education and become a minister. His initial surprise quickly gave way to barely concealed joy, though he maintained a serious demeanor and posed numerous critical questions to ensure my decision was not impulsive. Satisfied with my responses, he convened a meeting with other church leaders, and they decided to financially support my Master of Divinity program at a local Cantonese seminary while I simultaneously served part-time in the church.

During this period of my studies and church involvement, the church faced numerous challenges, notably a forced relocation that sparked considerable disagreement. I recall one meeting intended to build consensus where the elders opened the floor to the congregation. However, the discussion devolved into an argument between two elders. Sitting with another member who would later also become an elder, we felt utterly helpless, much like a child witnessing their parents quarrel. During this same period, my theological studies introduced me to the works of Karl Barth, Oliver O'Donovan, and biblical scholars such as N.T. Wright. I was deeply drawn to their writings, and simultaneously, I began to develop alternative perspectives on the teachings of GMBC's elders—truths I had previously taken for granted. This proved to be a kind of “loss of innocence.” This did not mean I questioned the faith I received at GMBC. Rather, a significant tension arose between the ideas of these Western theologians and the lived experience in the church.

This tension propelled me to continually grapple with these discrepancies. After graduating from the M.Div. program, I returned to GMBC as a salaried minister. The previous generation of elders had retired, and I now worked with the new elders. Collaborating with them, I realized my reflections were shared. While they deeply respected the former elders' character and faith, they too struggled with and reflected upon many practices, particularly inherited ones. These shared reflections led me to pursue practical theology studies in the UK, ultimately shaping my doctoral research topic. This program necessitated continuing as a part-time minister at GMBC for

potentially several years, a prospect the new elders fully supported. More surprisingly, when I informed Elias* (who had relocated from Hong Kong) of my decision—a formality maintained out of habit—he, despite his theological indifference, offered support and encouragement, cautioning only, “Just don’t become a liberal.”

Disconnect between Worlds

GMBC, like many churches in Hong Kong, exists in a space between “parallel worlds” – the bustling city, the professional workplace, and the intimate community of faith. This creates a unique set of challenges for its leaders, who must navigate the complexities of these different spheres, yet resonance between these worlds remains elusive. This disconnect, I believe, stems not only from practical challenges but also from a lack of mutual understanding between these spheres.

While Christianity enjoys considerable prominence and churches are numerous, with thousands of Christian churches and hundreds similar to GMBC,² truly understanding these communities presents a significant challenge. Inter-church organizations provide helpful census data, but these statistics rarely capture the nuanced voices of these diverse groups. While existing literature on church leadership offers valuable insights, as evidenced by the perennial presence of such publications in Hong Kong Christian bookstores, many of these books, often authored by celebrity pastors from large Western churches, have questionable applicability to the Hong Kong context. Furthermore, while local management scholars with Christian backgrounds contribute valuable books to this literature, these works predominantly propose blueprints or models of church leadership, primarily instructing leaders on optimal or effective methods. They rarely attend to the voices of these leaders, exploring their thoughts and the specific struggles of their respective communities. Consequently, while these perspectives may offer some practical value for certain church leaders, they generally lack the rigor and

² Chi-Wai Wu (胡志偉), 2014 香港教會普查簡報 [2014 Hong Kong Church Census Report], chu ban [1st ed.] (Hong Kong: 香港教會更新運動有限公司 [Hong Kong Church Renewal Movement Limited], 2015), 27.

insight valued by academic theologians.

During this initially unfocused exploration, I encountered Brian Malley's *How the Bible Works* in the seminary library. Malley's nuanced ethnographic study of biblical interpretation within North American churches, replete with insightful observations, resonated deeply with my own experiences in Bible study groups, despite its Western context. It also brought to mind two books I had read: Fei Xiaotong's classic *From the Soil*³ and Xiang Biao, *Transcending Boundaries*.⁴ These works offer penetrating analyses of the structures and dynamics within specific Chinese communities across different eras. Crucially, their approach, building understanding from the perspectives and internal tensions of community members rather than imposing grand theories, impressed me. However, such approaches remain relatively unfamiliar within GMBC, many Chinese churches, and even seminaries.

Upon beginning my studies in practical theology, I was surprised to discover that this effort to bridge the disconnect resonated with ongoing scholarly explorations worldwide. Diverse approaches within practical theology, despite varying methodologies and foci, seem to share a profound yearning for connection—connection with God and with real, embodied communities. Among these, the movement of “Ethnography and Ecclesiology” seemed particularly relevant to my own struggles, despite my limited understanding of ethnographic methods at the time. Furthermore, Sabrina Müller's *Lived Theology: Impulses for a Pastoral Theology of Empowerment*,⁵ with its call to amplify the voices of lay people within the church, resonated deeply, yet presented crucial differences from my own research questions. In the Western church contexts Müller describes, theological discourse is often significantly shaped, if not dominated, by formal theology, thus marginalizing lay perspectives. However, at GMBC, lay leaders, particularly the elders, possess a distinct voice within their community, often resonating strongly with the congregation.

³ Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil: The Foundations of Chinese Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

⁴ Biao Xiang, *Transcending Boundaries: Zhejiangcun; The Story of a Migrant Village in Beijing* (Leiden: Brill, 2005).

⁵ Sabrina Müller, *Lived Theology: Impulses for a Pastoral Theology of Empowerment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

Yet, these voices are dynamic, shifting and evolving, even fading at times, alongside generational and socio-contextual changes. Despite their presence, these voices remain largely unheard and unacknowledged outside of their immediate context, hindering the development of that mutual understanding with broader Christian theological traditions.

Therefore, this study, as a journey of “faith seeking understanding,” not only documents the voices of these elders but also seeks to bridge this disconnect by examining the lived theologies of leadership within this unique Mandarin-speaking community. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, the two generations of elders became the focus of my study, beginning with an exploration of their leadership and lived faith, and how their voices connect with the broader tradition of Christian theology. While I cannot deny a personal desire to preserve some of their voices before they fade, this is not an oral history project. The purpose is not to reconstruct the historical evolution of GMBC and its leadership, but rather to explore the theological significance of these elders and their leadership, thereby bridging the gap between lived faith within this community and the broader theological world. This pursuit is necessarily reflective and critical. Admittedly, critical approaches to church leadership are not common in Chinese church culture. However, my aim in highlighting potentially questionable aspects of their practices is not to condemn or accuse, but rather to foster rigorous discussion that can lead to renewal. I choose this approach, rather than simple praise, as my sincere expression of respect to them and GMBC.

The Trajectory of the Investigation

This thesis advances a central argument: that while the core metaphorical images of “Home” and “Soldiers of Christ”—drawn from biblical engagement and North American evangelicalism—powerfully articulate the inherited lived theology of lay leaders in a Chinese diaspora church, they also create significant intergenerational tension and constrain the practice of collective leadership. Ecclesial renewal, I contend, depends not on replacing these metaphors, but on their theological transformation. To this end, I demonstrate that Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s concept of “Christ existing as community” offers a robust Christocentric framework to reframe

these dominant images. This transforms "Home" into a dynamic community of belonging, "Soldiers" into a model of mutual vicarious representation, and "Biblical Faith" from a static symbol of authority into a dynamic, Christ-centered encounter with Scripture, offering a practical pathway to resolve ecclesial tensions and renew leadership practice.

Beyond its specific focus on GMBC, this thesis aims to make several contributions to broader academic and ecclesial conversations, targeting audiences across multiple disciplines:

Methodologically, for practical theology, it offers a revised pastoral cycle and a model for analyzing lived theology through metaphorical images. Empirically, for the sociology and anthropology of religion, it provides a rich ethnographic account of a transnational Chinese community, extending scholarly conversations on diaspora, identity, and the function of religious symbols. For Chinese and Asian diaspora studies, it offers a nuanced perspective that challenges monolithic views and engages with cultural heritage constructively. Theologically, its constructive engagement with Bonhoeffer's early ecclesiology speaks to contemporary debates in ecclesiology and leadership studies. Finally, for church leaders and seminary educators, it provides a framework for theological reflection that is deeply grounded in the lived realities of ministry.

Considering this pursuit, my thesis will be structured as follows: Chapter One will provide a multifaceted contextualization of GMBC and its leadership by tracing its origins within the broader context of North American Chinese churches and Bible study groups. It will further situate GMBC within the context of second-generation "Hong Kong Drifters" in Hong Kong, clarifying the research gap. Chapter Two, based on the identified needs, will construct a practical theological framework for expressing and reflecting upon the voices of these leaders—specifically how they employ metaphorical images within their lived theology. Chapter Three will present ethnographic data concerning these leaders, crystallized into three major themes: their image of the church, their self-understanding as lay leaders, and the underlying biblical faith informing these perspectives. Chapters Four through Six will offer a

multi-layered analysis of each of these themes in turn. Finally, Chapter Seven will culminate in an in-depth engagement with Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*, connecting this “from the soil” approach with the presence of Christ.⁶

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⁶ As English is not my first language, I have used Grammarly App and Google Gemini-1.5 for language support in this work.

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Chapter 1. A Chinese Church at the Crossroads: Understanding Lay Leadership in a Transnational Context

Every Christian community is unique, yet inextricably linked to its social environment. Formed by individuals within specific historical and cultural contexts, these communities are both shaped by and in turn shape their surroundings. GMBC, a Chinese church in Hong Kong, exemplifies this dynamic interplay. Understanding the complex confluence of social, historical, cultural, and religious influences that converge upon GMBC is crucial, not to stereotype or reduce its identity, but to provide a nuanced backdrop for in-depth exploration.

This exploration begins in section 1.1 with an examination of the background of GMBC's founders. Tracing their connections to North American Chinese Christian fellowships and churches reveals notable parallels in identity formation, the integration of Chinese cultural traditions with Christian faith, and the significant role of lay leadership. Section 1.2 then follows the trajectory of these first-generation leaders to Hong Kong, analyzing the socio-cultural context of GMBC's growth over the past two decades, particularly focusing on the "Hong Kong drifters" who constitute a significant portion of the congregation and second-generation leadership. Section 1.3 highlights the intergenerational tensions within both North American and Hong Kong Chinese churches, particularly regarding leadership, exploring how the erosion of Confucian cultural foundations and gaps in theological understanding contribute to these challenges. Finally, Section 1.4 delves deeper into these gaps, revealing that the theology of lay leadership represents a long-neglected area of inquiry within Chinese Christianity.

To depict this complex context, this chapter integrates diverse sources, triangulating perspectives for comprehensive understanding. Academic studies on Chinese Christianity, migration, and Hong Kong's socio-political dynamics provide robust scholarly voices, further enriched by insights from church practitioners regarding practical challenges and theological considerations in church leadership. Furthermore, GMBC publications, sermons, and personal narratives offer preliminary insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of the community, while carefully

balancing these perspectives to avoid overshadowing the subsequent interview data. Through this multi-faceted review, the chapter progressively unpacks the need for a contextually relevant theology of lay leadership within GMBC—a theology that addresses generational shifts in leadership, the community's relationship with its social context, and a distinctive Chinese theological imagination expressed through culturally relevant forms. This exploration culminates in the specific research questions that will guide the remainder of this study.

1.1 From North America to Hong Kong: Tracing the Roots of GMBC

The founding of GMBC is often recounted within the church as a legendary story.⁸ It traces the church's origins to 1995, detailing how a group of Mandarin-speaking Christian families, primarily from academic and corporate backgrounds in North America, established GMBC to minister to the growing population of mainland Chinese students and professionals in Hong Kong. The story highlights the church's evangelistic outreach through campus Bible study groups and its role in providing guidance and inspiration to this community.

While some factual details may vary,⁹ this passage generally reflects the GMBC community's perception of its founders as well as the memory of its origin. Several key concepts emerge: North America, campus Bible study groups, mainland Chinese students, and the gospel. While these concepts clearly highlight the connection between GMBC's origins and North American immigrant Chinese Christian communities, including Bible study groups and churches, further analysis of existing research is necessary to discern the specific nature and influence of these connections on GMBC's development.

In my recollection, GMBC's founders readily shared the church's founding narrative, often situating it within a broader historical context. As Elias* describes, "After 1949,

⁸ This narrative, articulated in church publications such as the foreword to "Use Me for Two Decades"(用我二十年) - *20th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2016), will be analyzed as ethnographic data in Chapter 3.

⁹ Varying numbers of families are cited in different records. A comprehensive list remains elusive in the available documents.

due to political circumstances, God's children were scattered from mainland China to Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia, and North America..."¹⁰ Yet, God simultaneously raised up Chinese churches worldwide to bring the gospel back to their compatriots in mainland China. This significant migration trajectory, from mainland China to Taiwan, then North America, and finally Hong Kong, coupled with the founders' exclusive use of Mandarin, strongly indicates a *waishengren* (外省人) identity. This term denotes those mainland Chinese who retreated to Taiwan with the Nationalist government after 1949, and the first generation of GMBC elders are their descendants. This unique identity often creates tension, leading to political disengagement while simultaneously fostering a profound emotional connection to mainland China.¹¹ This historical development, cultivating a deep emotional and political bond with the concept of "China," explains both their mainland-centric missionary work and their inclination to view Hong Kong as a strategic outpost rather than a place for deep, permanent integration.

However, Elias* further described the founders of the church as older "American drifters" who established a church to serve new "Hong Kong drifters" from mainland China. It should be noted that "American drifters" is not a widely used term; it was coined by them specifically in relation to the "Hong Kong drifters." Nevertheless, it reveals a deeper narrative of diaspora or "drifting" underlying the experiences of these "heroes" in GMBC's history during their early years in North America. Therefore, understanding how the North American Chinese Christian experience shaped GMBC's founders and its initial formation is crucial.

1.1.1 A Legacy of "Drifting": Identity and Belonging in Diaspora

Echoing Elias*'s narrative, numerous sources, though varying in specific interpretations, identify societal transformations and successive waves of Chinese immigration as key factors shaping North American Chinese communities, including churches. This encompasses the post-WWII influx of Chinese students and

¹⁰ Elias*, *History of GMBC, Sunday School Teaching*, (2018).

¹¹ For a concise and insightful analysis of the relationship between *waishengren* identity and political detachment, see Stéphane Corcuff, *Memories of the Future: National Identity Issues and the Search for a New Taiwan* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2015), xi–xxiv.

professionals, resulting in the establishment of numerous fellowships and churches. The 1989 Tiananmen Square incident and the subsequent arrival of Mandarin-speaking students in the 1990s further diversified these communities, notably through the growth of campus fellowships and their associated churches.¹² These diasporic experiences profoundly impacted identity formation and belonging. Fenggang Yang's influential work represents a significant scholarly contribution to understanding this complexity.¹³ Employing ethnographic methods focused on an independent, evangelical church, Yang's research examines how Chinese Christian immigrants in the United States construct and negotiate their multifaceted identities—Chinese, Christian, and American—a phenomenon he aptly terms “one church, three identities.”¹⁴ This intersection creates a dynamic space where these individuals navigate the complexities of belonging, selectively assimilating into American society while simultaneously preserving aspects of their Chinese cultural heritage and reinterpreting traditions through the lens of their evangelical faith.

Yang's findings highlight the agency of immigrants in shaping their integration processes, emphasizing the church's role not only as a religious institution but also as a vital site for cultural preservation, social support, and the construction of “adhesive identities”¹⁵—the capacity to maintain and integrate multiple, distinct cultural and religious affiliations. Yang notes that certain forms of “selective assimilation” allow these identities to be mutually reinforcing, for example, by fostering a sense of belonging, which is particularly vital given the displacement experienced by many immigrants. Furthermore, the perceived compatibility between evangelical Protestantism and Confucian values, particularly regarding family, ascetic ethics, and the emphasis on hard work, discipline, and education, facilitates the integration of religious beliefs with cultural heritage.

¹² See Su Wenfeng (蘇文峰), 大洋彼岸的長河—美國華人查經班回顧與展望 [A Transpacific River of Faith: Reflections and Prospects for Chinese Bible Study Groups in America.] Toronto: OCM, 2015. Fenggang Yang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park: Penn State University Press 1999).

¹³ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 178.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 187.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 17–18, 194–98.

While Yang offers insightful analysis of identity formation, it seems to lack the emotional resonance present in Elias's narrative. In contrast, Cecilia Yau frames the trajectory of North American Chinese Christian churches using evocative botanical metaphors: "Scattered Blossoms and Fruits" (花果飄零), representing the initial immigration period (pre-1882) before significant church establishment; "Fallen Leaves Returning to Roots" (葉落歸根), signifying the era of the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-1943); and "Taking Root in New Soil" (落地生根), describing the period from the repeal of the Exclusion Act (1943) onward, encompassing the post-1965 immigration wave. Yau's vivid imagery not only delineates distinct historical periods but also encapsulates the experiences of displacement, longing, and eventual belonging felt by Chinese Christians as they navigated immigration, discrimination, and cultural adaptation in North America.¹⁶

Both Yang and Yau's perspectives on community identity formation offer valuable insights into understanding GMBC. First, while studying in the US, GMBC's first-generation leaders likely experienced the later stages of "Taking Root in New Soil" within the burgeoning Chinese American church movement. This experience, along with the influence of mainland evangelists, instilled an evangelical fervor that shaped their later commitment to mission. Yau's concept of "Taking Root in New Soil," encompassing both the establishment of Chinese-led churches and the post-1965 immigration wave, aptly describes the context surrounding the founders' actions upon arriving in Hong Kong. However, as GMBC attempts to "take root" and transplant their faith into Hong Kong soil, how this community and its leaders navigate the complexities of their multifaceted identities (likely extending beyond simply three) within this specific context remains an open question.

1.1.2 Formative Influences: Churches, Bible Study Groups, and Leadership Paradigms

Within North American Chinese churches, two interconnected yet distinct

¹⁶ Cecilia Yau (邱清萍), 從飄泊到植根: 北美華人教會采風錄(*Cong Piao Bo Dao Zhi Gen: Bei Mei Hua Ren Jiao Hui Cai Feng Lu*) [From Wandering to Rootedness: A Collection of Essays on Chinese Churches in North America] (Petaluma, Calif.: 美國中信, 2010).13.

organizational forms—evangelical Chinese churches (particularly independent “Bible churches”) and Bible study groups—profoundly shaped GMBC. However, these two forms exhibit notably distinct structures, particularly regarding leadership.

Numerous studies suggest that many North American Chinese churches exhibit a leadership style reminiscent of Confucian paternalism. Cao Nanlai's ethnographic research in a New York Chinatown church portrays the church as a surrogate family, providing belonging and support. This reflects traditional Chinese authority and emphasizes the analogy between parent-child and God-human relationships. In this context, the pastor (often the sole or “senior” pastor) functions as a “foster father”, while the church is portrayed as a place where the congregants (mainly working-class young Chinese immigrants in this case) find a sense of belonging and support, resembling a “surrogate family”.¹⁷ This is echoed by Erika Muse's 2005 work, which reveals the persistence of Confucian family values within the structure of North American Chinese churches. For instance, Muse found that sermons and prayers in a Boston Chinatown church retained a strong Confucian influence, with women, particularly older women, often occupying subservient roles to male leaders.¹⁸ Yet, this portrait of authority is often complemented by an emphasis on a “nurturing home” with “loving parents.” While these ideals might appear to be Western imports, contrasting with classical hierarchical structures (i.e., *sangang* 三綱), such a binary view overlooks a crucial complexity. The concept of nurturing is not only present in modern, globalized Chinese families but is also an indigenous component of traditional Chinese social logic, coexisting with authority. This mechanism is important to the Paternalistic Leadership model and will be unpacked in the analysis of GMBC's leadership dynamics (5.1.2).

This style of church leadership, while prevalent throughout the global Chinese church and not limited to North America, is not the only form found within Chinese Christian groups. Notably, Wenfeng Su's edited work on North American Chinese

¹⁷ Nanlai Cao, “The Church as a Surrogate Family for Working Class Immigrant Chinese Youth: An Ethnography of Segmented Assimilation,” *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 2 (Summer, 2005):183-200.

¹⁸ Erika Muse, *The Evangelical Church in Boston's Chinatown: A Discourse of Language, Gender, and Identity* (London: Routledge, 2005).

Bible study groups, which “compiles 70 articles documenting and analyzing their evolution into churches between 1950 and 1980”, reveals a different internal dynamic.¹⁹ In the preface, Su, reviewing these articles, observes that during this period, campus Bible study groups in the US played a crucial role in bridging newly arrived Chinese immigrants and local Chinese churches, particularly by evangelizing the new immigrants. This influx of new believers, in turn, fueled the growth of these groups.

As a church historian, Su sharply notes some patterns regarding the dynamics within these groups. He describes that while student-organized and sometimes pastor-mentored, “spiritual seniors” played a crucial role. These individuals, often lay believers older than the students with established careers, families, and greater experience as North American immigrants, provided crucial stability. By hosting Bible studies, facilitating discussions, and offering support and guidance, these families of students, professors, and professionals fostered a supportive environment, particularly for single students, strengthening the often transient student fellowships and emerging immigrant churches. Interestingly, Su highlights that among these lay leaders, “Christian students who came to the US between 1950 and 1980 were often mature and seasoned young elites from churches in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and therefore, their ministries were highly autonomous.”²⁰ At least one or two founders of GMBC were among these individuals.

Regarding the relationship between Bible study groups and Chinese churches, Su notes that within approximately ten years, many evolved into established churches. As members settled and built careers, these groups transitioned from homogenous student fellowships to diverse, multi-generational congregations, a shift Su considers ideal. Bible study groups, in turn, became a regular outreach ministry of the established churches on campuses, continuing their evangelizing function.²¹ However, while Su clearly supports pastoral leadership within the church, he does not specifically explore the dynamics of leadership transitions, including the

¹⁹ Su, *A Transpacific River of Faith*, 21.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10-13.

²¹ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 61-67.

processes and potential struggles involved.²²

A noteworthy nuance emerges when comparing GMBC to Su's observations. As the introduction indicates, GMBC also evolved from a Bible study group into a church, maintaining campus Bible study groups throughout Hong Kong. However, despite briefly establishing a “senior pastor” position, GMBC has consistently remained under the leadership of lay elders, without a singular senior pastor leading the church structure. What factors contributed to this selective inheritance of its originating DNA? Does this reflect deeper issues within traditional Chinese church leadership? Further interviews with leaders are necessary to uncover these answers.

1.1.3 Unhealed Wounds: Intergenerational Tensions and Theological Gaps

GMBC's leaders arrived in Hong Kong during a period of rapid growth for Chinese churches in North America, hoping to transplant this model and its evangelical fervor. However, they appear to have overlooked some of the underlying concerns and challenges emerging within these North American churches. These challenges would soon confront them in the different context of Hong Kong.

This vulnerability stems from the inherent fragility of the “adhesive identities” Yang describes, integrated for selective assimilation. These identities are inherently in tension, particularly during intergenerational transitions. Managing such multiple identities is demanding. As Yang notes in an interview, maintaining adhesive identities requires continuous, conscious effort, constantly assessing context and prioritizing identities—a mentally and emotionally taxing process. Significantly, Yang's interviewee uses a “Kung Fu player” metaphor, likening navigating multiple cultural and religious identities to a fighter maintaining constant vigilance, selecting the most effective style from a diverse repertoire to respond to each combat situation.²³

However, maintaining this delicate balance is precarious. Conflict is often unavoidable at both the personal and collective levels. Clashes between the values

²² Several articles within Su's compiled works address these concerns.

²³ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 185-86.

and expectations associated with different identities create dissonance and necessitate difficult choices. Yang attributes the generational gap in Chinese churches to conflicts between Chinese and American cultures. Immigrant members prioritize traditional Chinese values, while American-born generations are more acculturated to American society. This cultural divergence creates conflict regarding language, cultural practices, and expectations of Confucian traditions, particularly filial piety. Consequently, this tension is reflected in the “Silent Exodus”—the departure of local-born, English-speaking congregants from North American Chinese churches—a phenomenon first reported in 1996²⁴ and persisting to the present.²⁵ This phenomenon is attributed to tension in the transmission of religious and ethnic identity, as interpreted by Paul Wang, with younger members seeking their own faith and identity.²⁶

These tensions are not always silent; sometimes, they significantly impact the church. In Yang’s study, he especially documents schism of a Chinese Bible Church arising from intertwined identity conflicts.²⁷ Clashes emerged between Chinese and American cultural values regarding relationships and generational expectations, between family-centric Chinese values and the Christian emphasis on evangelism, and between American democratic ideals and Christian views on authority. The resulting factions reflected different prioritizations: the breakaway group prioritized Christian identity, the remaining group sought a balance, while some formerly affiliated individuals prioritized Chinese identity and community engagement, which Yang interprets as partly stemming from “conflicts between Christian religion and Chinese culture”.²⁸ Yang highlights generational differences as a key factor in the schism, with immigrant Chinese prioritizing cultural preservation while American-born

²⁴ Helen Lee, with additional reporting by Ted Olsen, “Silent Exodus: Can the East Asian Church in America Reverse the Flight of Its Next Generation?” *Christianity Today* 40, no. 12 (1996).

²⁵ Nolan Todd, “Retaining the Next Generation in Chinese Diaspora Churches: A Theological Approach to Doing Mission (A Canadian Example),” *Practical Theology* 9, no. 4 (2016):351-64. The similar phenomenon was observed in Canadian Chinese Churches, and Wang interpreted that “interlocking identities of Chinese culture, Canadian values and Christian beliefs induce tensions and conflict”.

²⁶ As Wang interpreted that “interlocking identities of Chinese culture, Canadian values and Christian beliefs induce tensions and conflict”.

²⁷ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 179-183.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 179.

members sought greater independence and integration into American culture. This underlying tension ultimately manifested as a division within the leadership team. While Yang's research focuses on a single case study, it is not isolated. Michael Chu's research on Chinese churches in Australia, a similarly non-Chinese language immigrant church context, also identifies intergenerational differences in language, culture, and particularly leadership style expectations as sources of challenges within the church community, especially impacting leadership.²⁹

A significant gap starts to become evident: despite acknowledging and experiencing this generational divide, many Chinese church leaders have not sufficiently engaged with sociological research, such as Yang's, nor have they undertaken adequate theological reflection. Consequently, few theologically sound and practically viable solutions have been developed to address this issue, neither in North American Chinese churches generally nor within the GMBC specifically.

1.2 The “Hong Kong Drifters”: A New Chapter, Familiar Challenges

It is crucial to clarify that "generation" in this thesis signifies more than biological lineage or mere age. This term, used within the group (specifically originating from young mainland converts led to Christianity by the founders, referring to the founders themselves), actually delineates two distinct migratory and political cohorts. The first generation, as established, comprised primarily secondary migrants with a *waishengren* identity, their missiology shaped by the Cold War diaspora and oriented towards mainland China. Conversely, the second generation consists of primary migrants arriving in Hong Kong post-1997, widely referred to as "Hong Kong drifters." Their identity and worldview have been forged within the city's unique and often tense socio-political relationship with the mainland.

The establishment and growth of this community within GMBC's narratives are as legendary as its North American founders. This “miraculous” development, as proudly proclaimed by Elias* during the 10th-anniversary celebration:

²⁹ Michael K. Chu, *Intercultural Competence: Cultural Intelligence, Pastoral Leadership, and the Chinese Church* (Macquarie Park: Morling Press 2019), 181.

(Our church) has been raised up by God in an extraordinary time and an extraordinary place to serve an extraordinary group of people. May we unite in honoring the Lord as supreme, being faithful to His calling, giving our all, working together with the Holy Spirit, saving souls, building this church, and glorifying the name of the Lord.³⁰

The “extraordinary place” he refers to is Hong Kong, while the extraordinary “time” and “people” allude to the influx of mainland Chinese students and young professionals—often called “Hong Kong Drifters” (or “gangpiao” 港漂). This influx has significantly contributed to GMBC's growth over the past decade, a phenomenon comparable to the waves of mainland Chinese immigration to North America “Hong Kong Drifters” initially represented a key target demographic for evangelization and subsequently became a significant part of GMBC's congregation and second-generation leadership. However, the narratives of GMBC's second generation, the “Hong Kong drifter” leaders addressing GMBC's current state, offer a somewhat different perspective, as illustrated by Nasos*'s account:

As GMBC, who are we? We may identify ourselves as a non-denominational, evangelical Protestant church, drawing upon North American campus bible study evangelicalism, fundamentalist biblical inerrancy, and the pietism of mainland Chinese house churches ... However, we face 21st-century challenges such as secularization, religious pluralism, technological advancements and mass media, extreme individualism, declining authority, social fragmentation, and moral relativism, all of which contribute to the decline and fragmentation of evangelicalism itself. Within this context, we exist as a diverse yet inherently fragile community, resembling “rootless duckweed” (多姿多彩，先天不足，無根浮萍). Internally, we face generational transitions; externally, societal transformations. Looking ahead, we are still seeking God's guidance for our future path.³¹

While Nasos* clearly embraces an evangelical identity and sincerely seeks God's

³⁰ Elias*, “Passing the Torch” in “Vision and Grace” - 10th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC (2005):4.

³¹ Nasos*, “Church History: Where Are We?” Sunday School PPT, May 29th, 2022.

guidance, his narrative reveals less of the first generation's "extraordinary" pride and more of a "rootless duckweed" sentiment. This resonates with the earlier "American drifter" narrative of "scattered blossoms," expressing a continued sense of unsettlement within the GMBC community. He also highlights distinct challenges related to the Hong Kong context. Therefore, what similarities and differences exist between the ecclesial contexts faced by these new "Hong Kong drifters" and the earlier "American drifters" who founded GMBC? How have these differing contexts reshaped GMBC's leadership? Before delving into their perspectives through in-depth interviews, an exploration of the current context is necessary.

1.2.1 Navigating a New Landscape: The "Hong Kong Drifters" Experience

A key parallel with the experiences of the earlier Chinese immigrants to North America lies in the societal transformations driving migration. Post-handover Hong Kong's unique socio-political landscape has spurred an influx of highly educated young mainland Chinese who migrate for university and subsequently enter the workforce, often aspiring to global mobility and career advancement, as reflected in studies by Ip³² and Wei & Yao³³. The emergence of the Hong Kong drifters community is inextricably linked to the post-1997 political and economic integration between Hong Kong and mainland China. As part of a broader strategy to attract "talent" and strengthen its presence in the city, the Hong Kong SAR government implemented various schemes to encourage mainland graduates to remain. These included relaxed immigration policies, expanded university admissions for mainland students, and the introduction of the "Immigration Arrangements for Non-local Graduates" (IANG) program, simplifying the path to permanent residency. Consequently, Hong Kong became an attractive destination for ambitious mainland youth seeking educational and career opportunities, perceived as a stepping stone to global modernity and a relative escape from the perceived limitations of their

³² Iam-Chong Ip, "Two Logics of Chinese Transnationalism: The Case of *Gangpiao* and Hong Kong," *Cultural Studies* 34, no. 2 (2020): 257–76; "Urbanism as a Political Way of Life: The Case of Highly Educated Mainlanders in Hong Kong," *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies* 18, no. 1 (2022): 75–87.

³³ Wei Haitao and Yao Hong, "Motivation and Adaptation: The Immigration Process of Young 'Gangpiao'," *Contemporary Youth Research* (當代青年研究), no. 6 (November 2021): 375.

hometowns.³⁴

Within this context of displacement, Hong Kong drifters experience identity struggles inherent in migration, similar to those of earlier Chinese immigrants to North America. Navigating an unfamiliar social environment, particularly captured in the term “drifting” (漂), presents such challenges despite Hong Kong's geographical proximity to mainland China. lam-Chong Ip highlights the tendency of some mainland students to gravitate towards social circles within officially and semi-officially supported liaison organizations, fostering a sense of segregation from local society. The rising anti-mainland sentiment in Hong Kong in recent years exacerbates these tensions, creating a sense of otherness and reinforcing the Hong Kong drifters identity as distinct from the local population.³⁵ This, combined with a pragmatic desire to avoid conflict and prioritize career advancement, contributes to a prevailing sense of disengagement among many Hong Kong drifters. Wei & Yao's interview-based study further explores the cultural dimensions of this detachment, specifically identifying Cantonese proficiency as a significant cultural barrier.³⁶ While Ip acknowledges this challenge, he suggests that many Hong Kong drifters can acquire Cantonese within one or two years, minimizing its significance. However, this perspective may be overly optimistic. As Wei & Yao observe, language acquisition is often approached instrumentally, prioritizing practical needs over genuine cultural immersion. This reinforces the “drifting” aspect of their identity, contributing to a sense of uncertainty and a reluctance to fully integrate into local society. In other words, the feeling like the floating “rootless duckweed” described by Nasos* is still true.

In-depth research comparable to Fenggang Yang's work exploring the religious and spiritual experiences of Hong Kong drifters remains scarce. Easten Law's qualitative study offers a pioneering exploration of this area.³⁷ Law's characterization of Hong

³⁴ Ip, “Two Logics of Chinese Transnationalism”, 259.

³⁵ lam-Chong Ip, “Urbanism as a Political Way of Life: The Case of Highly Educated Mainlanders in Hong Kong,” *Social Transformations in Chinese Societies* 18, no. 1 (2022): 75–87.

³⁶ Wei & Yao, “Motivation and Adaptation”, 89.

³⁷ Easten G. Law, “Discerning a Lived Chinese Protestant Theology: Christian Identity, Everyday Life, and Encounters with the Other in Contemporary China” (PhD diss., Georgetown University, 2020).

Kong drifters as “inbetweeners” captures their liminal existence—caught between mainland China and Hong Kong. This resonates with broader societal concepts like Ip’s “disengaged urbanism” and Wei & Yao’s “boundary-struggling,” which articulate their incomplete integration into Hong Kong society. This is also a reality within GMBC, for many congregants and leaders.

Beyond the challenges of identity, Law also highlights the fast-paced, individualistic culture of Hong Kong amplifying feelings of isolation among drifters, even within church communities. This aligns with survey findings that socio-economic pressures—academic stress for students, financial burdens for workers, and emigration challenges—affect church participation and service, leading to burnout rather than spiritual renewal.³⁸ This echoes GMBC’s earlier expressed desire to enable believers to live pious lives within a bustling environment. However, whether this has truly been realized, even among church leaders, remains a question.

Finally, Law argues that the church in Hong Kong can also function as a “surrogate family”³⁹ (comparable with that observed in North American Chinese churches) offering a sense of belonging and support. This dynamic is particularly valuable in contexts where traditional familial and social networks are absent. However, a critical examination of the struggles faced by Hong Kong churches below reveals challenges and tensions no less significant than those experienced by North American Chinese churches.

1.2.2 The Pain of Displacement: Social and Political Upheaval in Hong Kong

The “Hong Kong drifter” experience, while mirroring some aspects of the North American Chinese Christian experience, unfolds within a uniquely challenging context. The promise of belonging within the church is complicated by a confluence of social and political factors that create a distinct “pain” for this community.

³⁸ "Focus Group Analysis on the Situation of Protestantism in Hong Kong 2023," 1st ed. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Christian Council and Divinity School of Chung Chi College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, June 2023).

³⁹ Law, "Orienting a Transnational Lived Theology for Asian America," 182.

Hong Kong's recent history has been marked by social and political upheaval. As interactions between mainland China and Hong Kong deepened after 1997, cultural, identity-based, and political clashes intensified, particularly noticeable among mainland Chinese students on Hong Kong campuses.⁴⁰ From the 2014 Umbrella Movement to the 2019 anti-extradition protests, societal tensions in Hong Kong sharply escalated, impacting even church congregations. Divergent political views within churches fostered internal divisions, alienation, and a breakdown of community, demonstrating the church's vulnerability to broader societal fragmentation. The subsequent COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these challenges. Lockdowns and restrictions intensified feelings of isolation, anxiety, and hopelessness, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups,⁴¹ including new immigrants such as “Hong Kong drifters”.

This climate of political disengagement among 'Hong Kong drifters' directly shapes the experience of a church like GMBC, differentiating its struggles from those of many local Cantonese congregations. According to a study by Ip, most highly educated mainlanders in Hong Kong deliberately remain aloof from local politics as a pragmatic survival strategy, seeking to protect their careers and avoid state scrutiny.⁴² This cultivated apathy means that a church composed primarily of this demographic, like GMBC, becomes an invaluable “apolitical sanctuary”. For its members, the church offers a refuge not only from cultural and linguistic alienation but also from the pressure to take a side in the city's polarizing conflicts.

This unique positionality helps explain why GMBC did not experience the same type of internal political divisions that fractured many local churches. However, it faced different challenges. As Kwok et al. observe, the broader environment of fear and uncertainty, coupled with criticism of churches from the government, still created a

⁴⁰ See Iam-Chong Ip, "Urbanism as a Political Way of Life"; Also, Wei & Yao, "Motivation and Adaptation".

⁴¹ Wai Luen Kwok, C. K. Martin Chung, King Lai Wong, and Shun Shing Wong, "Narrative and Peacebuilding in Hong Kong: The Cultivating Peace Project as Practical Theology," *Practical Theology* 17, no. 6 (2024): 522–35.

⁴² Ip, "Urbanism as a Political Way of Life," 84.

difficult context. Furthermore, the subsequent emigration wave during the COVID-19 pandemic, driven by a mix of political and economic concerns, impacted GMBC just as it did other church communities, straining resources and leading to a sense of loss and abandonment for those who remained.⁴³

Beyond the dramatic societal shifts, Hong Kong's evolving family structure continues to profoundly shape both community life and the church. Since the late 1960s, the traditional extended Chinese family—steeped in rich traditional values—has gradually ceded ground to the nuclear model.⁴⁴ This transformation, compounded by intergenerational conflicts and intensified by social movements such as the Umbrella Movement and the Anti-ELAB Movement, has weakened familial bonds.⁴⁵ Consequently, many young Christians have distanced themselves from their original congregations in search of identity amid both political and personal turmoil. As one participant observed, “the struggle for democratic freedom became enmeshed with family tensions and was integral to how they made sense of themselves in facing up to authoritarian families and government.”⁴⁶

As a mainland Chinese immigrant, a long-term member, and a minister at GMBC, I have witnessed alongside the elders the numerous transitions within this city. Initially, this involved welcoming new students from the mainland each year, providing emotional and practical support. Later, we listened as those entering the workforce shared their struggles and triumphs navigating the Hong Kong professional landscape. We celebrated new families and births, and mourned alongside those experiencing loss. However, recent social movements and the pandemic have presented unprecedented challenges for church leadership. GMBC's predominantly first-generation Christian community, comprised largely of mainland immigrants with limited political engagement in Hong Kong, has not experienced the

⁴³ Kwok, et al., "Narrative and Peacebuilding in Hong Kong," 523.

⁴⁴ See Fai-Ming Wong, "Family Structure and Processes in Hong Kong," *International Journal of Sociology* 9, no. 3 (Fall, 1979):76.

⁴⁵ Petula Sik Ying Ho et al., "Speaking against Silence: Finding a Voice in Hong Kong Chinese Families through the Umbrella Movement," *Sociology (Oxford)* 52, no. 5 (2018):967.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

same level of familial and generational conflict seen in local congregations. Nevertheless, the leadership team has still needed to navigate difficult decisions while listening to members from diverse perspectives. It is within this context that Nasos*'s metaphor of "rootless duckweed" resonated deeply, capturing the uncertainty felt by both the congregation and the leadership team. The statement "we are still seeking God's guidance" became a sincere and heartfelt cry.

1.3 Amplifying Lay Voices: The Need for a Contextual Theology of Leadership

While the aforementioned struggles and pains clearly highlight numerous issues deserving of deeper theological reflection, before considering *how* to reflect, it is necessary to address the crucial question of *who* should undertake this reflection. Academic researchers certainly have a role to play in such theological tasks, but they are not constantly facing these challenges on the front lines of church practice. While church pastors are undoubtedly closer to these situations, the ecclesial setting and their own theological training may present limitations.

Based on my personal experience as both a church minister and a doctoral student at GMBC, I believe lay leaders are indispensable subjects in this reflection, not only in terms of specific advantages but also inherent obligations. The aforementioned socio-environmental challenges are not abstract concepts for them but lived realities interwoven with their work, families, relationships, and social contexts. This lived experience imbues their perspectives with a practical, empirical grounding, emphasizing the intersection of faith and real-world challenges. Within the church, these lay leaders not only influence congregations through decision-making and teaching but, due to their shared life experiences, perspectives, and even language, also exert a profound impact—both positive and potentially negative—on congregational faith and practice. Therefore, appropriate theological reflection should not impose pre-determined answers onto their leadership practices, but rather empower them to continuously navigate the ongoing challenges arising from a changing context. Achieving such contextually relevant theological reflection,

however, is not easy. The following discussion will address three key challenges: firstly, certain inherent theological limitations within the Chinese evangelical community; secondly, the long-neglected theological potential of lay leaders within the Chinese Christian narrative; and finally, the untapped potential of culturally specific metaphorical expressions within Chinese theological discourse. Each of these points will be examined in detail below.

1.3.1 Limitations of Conservative Evangelicalism: Challenges for Leadership

Nasos*, a second-generation elder, readily uses the term “fundamentalism” to characterize their theological stance in the previous description of GMBC. Indeed, within many Chinese Christian contexts, this term carries positive connotations, signifying theological conservatism, steadfast faith, and particularly, biblical fidelity. However, Nasos* also clearly recognizes the challenges posed by the leadership team's composition: “As a non-denominational evangelical church, the lack of systematic theological training and broader perspectives among lay leaders results in a deficiency of holistic pastoral theology and ministry principles, leading to insufficiently nuanced and contextually relevant teaching and pastoral care for the congregation.”⁴⁷

These observations resonate within the broader context of Chinese churches. For instance, Alexander Chow offers a working definition of Chinese evangelicalism, describing it as “a form of Chinese Protestantism which emphasizes the authority of the Bible, the atoning work of a high Christology, the importance of evangelism, and an autonomous yet collaborative ecclesiology.”⁴⁸ This description is accurate, but it is important to note that these theological emphases often serve as markers of ideological positions rather than resources for nurturing the leaders as well as the community.

⁴⁷ Nasos*, Sermon on Church Co-workers Retreat Camp, October 1st, 2021.

⁴⁸ Alexander Chow, “Urbanisation, Diaspora, and the Tenacity of Chinese Evangelicalism,” in *Ecumenism and Independency in World Christianity: Historical Studies in Honour of Brian Stanley*, ed. Alexander Chow and Emma Wild-Wood (Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2020), 322.

Within North American Chinese churches, the source of GMBC's DNA, this theological model has presented several challenges. As Yang mentions, while congregants uphold the authority of the Bible, Bible study groups often function primarily as platforms for evangelism rather than in-depth textual engagement,⁴⁹ differing significantly from the academic discipline of biblical studies. Furthermore, even within conservative, evangelism-focused churches, schisms arise based on leadership styles (democratic versus “biblical” hierarchical models) and resource allocation (community engagement versus prioritizing evangelism).⁵⁰

Within a larger scope of Chinese evangelical immigrant churches, Chow carefully contrasts their “activism” with the more overtly socio-political engagement found in some Western evangelical traditions. He highlights how social participation within Chinese evangelicalism often translates into providing support for fellow immigrants, effectively acting as a “surrogate family.” However, Chow also notes that these churches can function as both bridges to integration and protective enclaves, potentially reinforcing a sense of “forever foreigner” status. Reconciling this surrogate role with broader societal integration remains a challenge. Furthermore, Chow's observation of the autonomous yet networked ecclesiological character of these churches reveals a phenomenon driven more by practical adaptation than robust theological construction.⁵¹

It is important to note that the aforementioned theological gaps and practical challenges pertain to the entire church, encompassing both clergy and laity. For ordinary congregants, these gaps may be even wider. Ann Gillian Chu's recent ethnographic study, for example, constructs a theological profile of a typical middle-class Hong Kong Christian, “Chan Tai-Man,” characterized by a focus on inward piety, a view of diligent work as good witness and an opportunity for evangelism, and a tendency toward obedience to authority and political apathy. Notably, these theological characteristics are generally compatible with the aforementioned profile of Chinese evangelical churches. However, such a theological framework,

⁴⁹ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 67-70.

⁵⁰ See the case mentioned in *Ibid.*, 8–9, 14–15.

⁵¹ Chow, “Urbanisation, Diaspora, and the Tenacity of Chinese Evangelicalism”, 332-33, 341.

particularly for church leaders, proves insufficient to address the complexities of contemporary social challenges.

These challenges are familiar to GMBC leaders like Elias* and Nasos*. While Elias* champions evangelism as GMBC's divine mission, questions remain regarding how newly converted “Hong Kong drifters” navigate faith, life, and the complexities of their Hong Kong context. Does GMBC, as a community, facilitate their societal integration or inadvertently reinforce their “drifter” status? Unlike the first generation of elders, who generally prioritized personal piety over theological depth, Nasos* recognized this deficiency as inadequate for contemporary practice and reflection. As both an elder and a university professor, he leveraged his academic expertise to engage with Western theological resources. He actively promoted the integration of Timothy Keller's theology within GMBC, initially with some success. However, despite sustained effort, Keller's influence ultimately waned and disappeared from the GMBC narrative.

1.3.2 Invisible Inheritors: Recognizing the Theological Contributions of Lay Leaders

As leaders of an independent church, Elias* and Nasos* have inextricably linked their destinies with that of GMBC, deeply immersed in their congregation's struggles and explorations. They acutely perceive the gap between their biblical faith and the challenges they face. However, existing theological frameworks seem inadequate, failing to provide meaningful support, insight, or practical application within their community. Placing GMBC's leaders within the broader context of Chinese Christianity reveals a significant disconnect: a gap exists between formal theology and the lived experience of Chinese Christian lay leaders. This stems from a historical undervaluation of their contributions, a Western-centric lens, and a form of clerical elitism in understanding Chinese Christianity. This marginalization has obscured the practical innovations and theological insights embedded within the practices and experiences of lay leaders, despite their crucial role in sustaining Chinese Christianity. Therefore, this section aims to break this silence, arguing that bridging this gap requires acknowledging the significant theological work already

being done by lay leaders and moving beyond traditional academic frameworks to embrace a more inclusive understanding of Chinese churches and their leadership. Examining the history of Christianity in China reveals how this undervaluation has taken shape. Early studies, often adopting a missionary-centric perspective, framed Christianity's development primarily as a process of cultural transmission from West to East.⁵² This approach overlooks the agency of local communities and the crucial role of lay leadership in shaping the faith's trajectory. For instance, the common narrative surrounding Catholicism in China after the "Rites Controversy"⁵³ and the 1724 imperial ban often emphasizes the supposed "eradication" of Christianity until the arrival of Protestant missionaries.⁵⁴ However, this overlooks the experience of local Catholic communities in Southeast China during periods of suppression. Daniel H. Bays's research highlights the vital role of local Chinese lay leaders in sustaining these communities, observing a "persistent, overriding dynamic" where local Chinese believers, initially participants or subordinate partners to foreign missionaries, ultimately became the "true inheritors or owners" of the local church.⁵⁵ That said, their enculturation of theology, as Lars Laamann notes, frequently involved syncretism with existing popular cults and local traditions, deviating from orthodox Christianity. This often led newly arriving missionaries to struggle to recognize these adapted versions of Christian faith.⁵⁶

Similar patterns emerge within twentieth-century Chinese Protestant communities.

⁵² Mungello, David E., "Historiographical Review: "Reinterpreting the History of Christianity in China." *The Historical Journal* 55, no. 2 (June 2012), 533-52.

⁵³ See Richard Madsen, "Christian Communities in China," in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Religions*, ed. by Mark Juergensmeyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 373-4. Some earlier but more detailed discussion in different perspectives includes: George Minamiki, *The Chinese Rites Controversy: From its Beginning to Modern Times* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1985); James S. Cummins, *A Question of Rites: Father Domingo Navarette and the Jesuits in China* (Aldershire: Scolar, 1993).

⁵⁴ This narrative of eradication is common in Chinese evangelical historiography and often attributes it to theological "accommodation", see Wenfeng Su's perspective represents the viewpoint of this category of Chinese evangelical scholars. See Wenfeng Su(蘇文峰), 從歷史角度看中國文化宣教 [Viewing Chinese Cultural Missions from a Historical Perspective], in 普世宣教運動面面觀 [Perspectives on the World Christian Movement], ed. Ralph D. Winter and Steven C. Hawthorne (Sunnyvale: Great Commission Centre, 2006), 338-45.

⁵⁵ Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 13.

⁵⁶ Lars P. Laamann, *Christian Heretics in Late Imperial China: Christian Inculturation and State Control, 1720–1850* (London; New York: Routledge, 2006), 18-19, 88.

Alongside prominent figures with formal theological training, like T. C. Chao, influential lay leaders such as Watchman Nee, Wang Mingdao, and Jing Dianying played a significant, perhaps even more impactful, role in shaping Chinese Protestantism. These leaders, some of whom rejected formal ordination, often developed theological expressions that diverged considerably from Western Christian theological systems, reflecting a deep engagement with their specific context and the needs of their communities. Although often perceived, or “self-identified”, as fundamentalists,⁵⁷ these figures exhibit significant theological diversity. Despite ongoing scholarly interest, they are more frequently treated as exemplars of faith than as sources of rich theological insights emerging from lived experience. These insights remain largely unexplored and underutilized within contemporary Chinese evangelical churches like GMBC.

To adequately explore these theological possibilities, a reconsideration of the essential questions of theology is necessary. Rowan Williams's three theological styles—celebratory, communicative, and critical—provide a valuable tool for appreciating diverse expressions of theology and can illuminate this issue.⁵⁸ Combined with Simon Chan's advocacy for greater attention to “grassroots” theologies,⁵⁹ the lived experiences of Chinese Christian lay leaders, often expressed through practice and adaptation (communicative and celebratory styles), can be understood as legitimate and vital forms of theological reflection. Their engagement with local customs and idioms, addressing contextual concerns, exemplifies the communicative process, involving not only key figures within the Chinese church but also ordinary leaders like the GMBC elders. Moreover, their practices and interpretations often challenge established ecclesiologies and theological assumptions, highlighting the divergence between formal, sometimes Western-centric or overly clerical theology. However, embracing this communicative approach does not necessitate rejecting the Western Christian tradition or uncritically accepting all lived beliefs and practices. Critical analysis, as articulated by Williams, remains essential, encompassing the perspectives of both lay leaders and academic

⁵⁷ Chow, "Urbanisation, Diaspora, and the Tenacity of Chinese Evangelicalism," 332.

⁵⁸ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), xiv-xv.

⁵⁹ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

theologians. This engagement between grassroots theology and the broader Christian legacy is particularly crucial given the enduring influence of certain lay leaders within the Chinese church. Rigorous methodology is necessary to ensure the lay leaders and their experiences are properly understood within their social and ecclesial contexts, and their theological contributions are evaluated responsibly.

1.3.3 Speaking in Images: Understanding Lay Theological Perspectives

Understanding and evaluating the “grassroots theology” of many Chinese lay leaders necessitates engagement with their extensive use of metaphorical approaches and theological imagery. For instance, Knight and Knight discuss Watchman Nee, a significant figure in early twentieth-century Chinese Christianity, and his metaphorical approach to the Song of Songs.⁶⁰ This interpretive approach exemplifies spiritual or allegorical interpretation, known in Chinese as *lingyi jiejing* (靈意解經), a broader tradition within Chinese Christianity.⁶¹ Contrasting Nee's work with systematic theology, the authors find parallels with Sallie McFague's work on metaphor and theology. Specifically, they highlight how biblical imagery, for Nee, bridges the gap between the familiar and the unfamiliar, generating new meaning and facilitating holistic personal engagement—encompassing emotions, imagination, and bodily experiences.⁶² Jacob Chengwei Feng, analyzing Nee alongside his contemporary Wang Mingdao, highlights both figures' embrace of allegorical interpretation despite their emphasis on scriptural authority.⁶³ He observes that Nee's metaphorical interpretations generally follow established biblical patterns, particularly those in Paul's writings. Feng suggests that this approach, as a “theological method,” may be a distinctive feature of Chinese theology, as exemplified by Wang and Nee. Notably, Nee's use of allegory remains largely within the contours established by Paul, while

⁶⁰ Ed Knight and Muireen Knight, “Song of Songs: Metaphorical Thinking in Watchman Nee's Narrative Theological Reflection,” *Practical Theology* 9, no. 1 (2016): 71–76.

⁶¹ Further analysis of this interpretive approach can be found in chapters within the landmark collected work, *Reading Christian Scriptures in China* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), edited by Chloë Starr.

⁶² Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2000).

⁶³ Jacob Chengwei Feng, “Theological Method of Chinese Theology in the Republican Era (1911–1949): A Case Study of Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee,” *Journal of Chinese Theology* 9 (2023): 38–65.

Wang's appears more arbitrary and imaginative.⁶⁴

These discussions raise new questions. While the applicability of Sallie McFague's theory suggests the importance of metaphorical approaches in Chinese Christian thought, the nuanced differences between Nee and Wang highlight the flexibility and diversity of this approach. How does this theological approach relate to lived church experience? Furthermore, Feng notes that for Nee, who deeply respected scriptural authority, "Both literal and metaphorical interpretations are adopted, although the former has higher priority than the latter." However, this distinction remains unclear, as "literal" and "metaphorical" interpretations can overlap within biblical texts. This raises the question of the precise relationship between these metaphorical approaches and the biblical text.

Indeed, such metaphorical expressions of faith are prevalent in the everyday narratives of Chinese Christians. From the "Kungfu player" image cited by Yang Fenggang to the "rootless duckweeds" metaphor in Nasos*, these expressions encapsulate profound emotions and reflections on the church and faith. However, while Nee and Wang, though not ordained clergy, were prominent theological thinkers with extensive written legacies amenable to in-depth analysis, the GMBC leaders, by contrast, possess a far less substantial body of written work and sermons. This limited textual record is insufficient for in-depth theological analysis and dialogue, particularly regarding their understanding of the church and leadership.

1.3.4 Clarifying the Lay Leadership Structure at GMBC

To fully appreciate the dynamics of leadership at GMBC, it is necessary to understand its formal governance structure, which defines the roles and relationships between the key figures in this study.

The highest governing body is the Board of Elders. The term 'lay leader' in this thesis

⁶⁴ Feng, "Theological Method of Chinese Theology," 56-58.

refers specifically to these Elders. These unsalaried volunteers maintain secular employment while providing church leadership. Their authority derives from the congregation, requiring a two-thirds majority vote for confirmation. According to the church's organizational rules, these lay Elders are authorized to perform all pastoral duties, encompassing preaching, spiritual guidance, and ultimate responsibility for the church's vision and governance.⁶⁵

My salaried ministerial role (傳道), while formally distinct from that of an Elder, entailed ex officio participation on the Board. This afforded me the opportunity to attend meetings and contribute to discussions but without voting privileges. Organizationally, my position was subordinate to the Board, as the church's by-laws stipulate that salaried staff are answerable to them.⁶⁶

1.4 Crossroads and Emerging Questions: Charting a Path for Research

This chapter has therefore illuminated the complex influences shaping GMBC, revealing a community at a critical crossroads. The narratives of diaspora, the pressures of a unique socio-political context, and the subtle friction between generational leadership ideals have exposed a profound tension at the heart of GMBC's identity. This tension—between inherited images and lived realities, between mission and belonging, between the ideal of 'Home' and the burden of being a 'Soldier'—raises a fundamental problem that is not merely practical but profoundly theological, rooted in the very language and images the community uses to understand itself. This thesis therefore addresses this core tension by pursuing a central research question:

How do the metaphorical images employed by lay leaders in a Chinese diaspora church in Hong Kong both reveal and constrain their lived theology, and what theological resources are required to transform these images into

⁶⁵ GMBC by-laws, versions 2009, 2012.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

pathways for ecclesial renewal and more sustainable leadership?

To answer this question, the investigation is structured around four focused inquiries that guide the study through its descriptive, analytical, and constructive phases:

1. **Ecclesiological Perceptions:** How do lay leaders at GMBC theologically perceive the nature and mission of the church, particularly through the metaphors and images they employ?
2. **Leadership Identities:** How do lay leaders at GMBC theologically perceive their own roles and identities as leaders within the church? What metaphors and images do they use to describe their leadership practices and experiences?
3. **Theological Foundation:** How do the theological perceptions of church and leadership among lay leaders at GMBC intersect with their personal faith and lived experiences in Hong Kong? How do they navigate the tensions and challenges arising from their multifaceted identities as Chinese Christians, professionals, and members of a diasporic community?
4. **Reflection and Transformation:** How can these metaphorical images be critically analyzed and theologically transformed to develop a more contextually relevant and renewing model of lay leadership? Beyond its immediate pastoral goal, the research is designed to make original contributions to several interdisciplinary fields.

Beyond its specific focus on GMBC, this thesis aims to make several contributions to broader academic and ecclesial conversations, targeting audiences across multiple disciplines:

Methodologically, for practical theology, it offers a revised pastoral cycle and a model for analyzing lived theology through metaphorical images. Empirically, for the sociology and anthropology of religion, it provides a rich ethnographic account of a transnational Chinese community, extending scholarly conversations on diaspora, identity, and the function of religious symbols. For Chinese and Asian diaspora studies, it offers a nuanced perspective that challenges monolithic views and engages with cultural heritage constructively. Theologically, its constructive

engagement with Bonhoeffer's early ecclesiology speaks to contemporary debates in ecclesiology and leadership studies. Finally, for church leaders and seminary educators, it provides a framework for theological reflection that is deeply grounded in the lived realities of ministry.

Considering this pursuit, my thesis will be structured as follows: Chapter One will provide a multifaceted contextualization of GMBC and its leadership by tracing its origins within the broader context of North American Chinese churches and Bible study groups. It will further situate GMBC within the context of second-generation “Hong Kong Drifters” in Hong Kong, clarifying the research gap. Chapter Two, based on the identified needs, will construct a practical theological framework for expressing and reflecting upon the voices of these leaders—specifically how they employ metaphorical images within their lived theology. Chapter Three will present ethnographic data concerning these leaders, crystallized into three major themes: their image of the church, their self-understanding as lay leaders, and the underlying biblical faith informing these perspectives. Chapters Four through Six will offer a multi-layered analysis of each of these themes in turn. Finally, Chapter Seven will culminate in an in-depth engagement with Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*, connecting this “from the soil” approach with the presence of Christ.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ As English is not my first language, I have used Grammarly App and Google Gemini-1.5 for language support in this work.

Chapter 2. Methodology: A Pastoral Cycle for Exploring Lived Theologies of Leadership

Guided by the research questions articulated in Chapter 2, this study requires a methodology capable of discerning the perspectives of lay leaders, analyzing them within the interplay of individual and communal dynamics, and subsequently facilitating critical engagement and reflection with broader Christian tradition. To this end, this chapter constructs a methodological framework. First, it utilizes practical theology as a platform for this process, guiding the specific methods employed at each stage. Building upon this, the chapter initially explores metaphorical images through the concept of lived theology and how this exploration is realized through ethnographic methods. Subsequently, it outlines the process of theological analysis and reflection designed to answer the research questions. The research process including data collection and ethical considerations are also addressed in this chapter.

2.1 A Revised Pastoral Cycle for Lived Theology

Practical Theology, broadly understood as “a kind of theology that takes seriously both practice and theology”,⁶⁸ is still a burgeoning field developed by both academic theologians and church practitioners, even when not explicitly termed as such. For instance, Rowan Williams's three dimensions of theology—celebratory, communicative, and critical—briefly mentioned in the previous chapter, offer, according to Ward, valuable insights about how practical theology operates within the life of the church.⁶⁹ An inspiring definition offered by Bonnie Miller-McLemore frames practical theology as encompassing: (1) the lived activities of believers, (2) a curricular area within theological education, (3) an approach to exploring theology

⁶⁸ Pete Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology: Mission, Ministry, and the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 67.

⁶⁹ Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 13.

and religious faith, and (4) a rigorous academic discipline.⁷⁰ This multifaceted definition highlights the interconnectedness of rigorous scholarship, reflective practice, and the daily activities of faith. While emphasizing theological grounding, academic rigor, and educational relevance, Miller-McLemore's model also acknowledges the communal nature and interdisciplinary openness of practical theology.

Ward enriches this understanding by framing practical theology as “faith seeking understanding.” This dynamic process, inspired by Anselm, begins with faith as a divinely bestowed gift, a relationship with God. This faith, grounded in individual and communal experience, propels a yearning for deeper knowing. This “seeking” is not a passive reception but an active, interactive engagement with God through reason, reflection, and spiritual practice. This dynamic interplay continually shapes both the seeker and the understanding sought, acknowledging the infinite nature of God and the ongoing journey of faith. This pursuit unfolds within the church's shared life and traditions, benefiting from communal wisdom. Ultimately, this transformative process aims to deepen faith and foster a more faithful Christian witness.

In research and writing, Practical Theology frequently utilizes a “Pastoral Cycle” framework. The pastoral cycle embodies practical theology's core aim: bridging theology and practice. Its cyclical nature ensures a dynamic interplay where reflection leads to action, which in turn informs further reflection. This framework usually provides a structured, step-by-step process for theological reflection. Richard Osmer's four tasks model can be a good example,⁷¹

- **Descriptive-Empirical Task (What is going on?):** To gather information and describe a specific pastoral situation to understand its context and dynamics.
- **Interpretive Task (Why is this going on?):** To analyze the situation using insights from theology, social sciences, and other relevant disciplines to

⁷⁰ Bonnie Miller-McLemore, "Introduction: The Contributions of Practical Theology," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* (Newark: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 5.

⁷¹ Richard Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2008), 1–29.

uncover underlying patterns and causal factors.

- **Normative Task (What ought to be going on?):** To engage theological principles, Scripture, and tradition to discern ethical and theological norms for action.
- **Pragmatic Task (How might we respond?):** To develop and implement practical strategies to address the situation, informed by the insights gained in the previous stages.

By progressing through these four tasks iteratively, the Pastoral Cycle provides a dynamic and structured approach to addressing complex pastoral situations, effectively integrating theological reflection and practice.

However, the Pastoral Cycle also has its limitations. While the early “see-judge-act” model established by Cardinal Joseph Cardijn provided a valuable foundation, emphasizing experience and action—a core element inherited by many later versions of Pastoral Cycle⁷²—its simplicity can be perceived as overly linear and judgment-laden. Osmer's model, building upon Cardijn's foundation, expands the process by incorporating diverse perspectives gathered in the descriptive-empirical and interpretive stages. This fosters a more contextual and less rigidly prescribed approach to determining “what ought to be going on” compared to the earlier model's “judge” stage. Nevertheless, Osmer's “normative” task can still be perceived as prioritizing established theological tradition in a top-down manner. Lartey's model offers a unique contribution with the addition of “Situational Analysis of Theology.”⁷³ This step emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between theology and practice, making the normative process more grounded in and responsive to the lived realities of faith. Yet, this still does not fully address the inherent limitations. As Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman point out, confining theology to a single stage (or a

⁷² Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 116.

⁷³ Emmanuel Lartey, “Practical Theology as a Theological Form,” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison, 1st ed. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2000), 129–32.

limited number of stages) dedicated to normativity is problematic.⁷⁴ Theology inevitably influences all stages of the cycle, implicitly shaping the researchers and practitioners' perspectives and actions even in the descriptive and interpretive phases. This also raises a crucial concern regarding the potential for bias: in the Descriptive-Empirical task, whose perspective informs the “description”? Without careful attention to this subjective influence, and a deliberate effort to incorporate the perspectives of those within the situation, the researcher's viewpoint inevitably shapes the initial description. This can lead to overlooking crucial details or misrepresenting the lived experiences of those involved. Such initial bias can create a false sense of objectivity, potentially marginalizing the voices and perspectives of those being studied. Consequently, this undermines the entire process of theological reflection, leading to inaccurate interpretations and ultimately, ineffective or even detrimental practical responses.

Given the specific needs of this research—namely, the engagement between theology and leadership practice within highly contextualized settings—I propose a modified Pastoral Cycle grounded in the principle of “faith seeking understanding.” This revised model, by emphasizing the active and relational nature of faith, seeks to address the limitations of the traditional cycle and promote a more collaborative and transformative approach to theological reflection. It consists of four interconnected tasks:

1. **Faith Seeking Articulation:** This task moves beyond mere “objective” description to a deeply theological articulation of “what's going on.” It seeks to “unearth” the community's lived theology by articulating the authentic, yet perhaps implicit, theology present within its lived experiences.
2. **Faith Seeking Collaboration:** This task extends the interpretive task by embracing interdisciplinarity and fostering critical and communicative engagement. It may involve contextual or practical theological analysis of specific concepts or themes emerging from the interpretation, rather than

⁷⁴ Kathleen Cahalan and James Nieman, “Mapping the Field of Practical Theology,” in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education, and Christian Ministry*, ed. Dorothy C. Bass and Craig R. Dykstra (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Pub., 2008), 62–85.

treating theological reflection as a completely separate step.

3. **Faith Seeking Connection in Christ:** Stemming from the “normative” task, this stage engages theological traditions dialogically—not as rigid dictates, but as a living legacy offering resources for contemporary challenges. By fostering conversation between tradition and the present context, this stage promotes critical reflection and seeks new understandings and responses, aiming to both reaffirm and renew Christian identity within the community's specific context.
4. **Faith Seeking Transformation:** This task moves beyond simply understanding the situation to enacting transformative change. This stage is not merely about applying pre-determined solutions but about co-creating new possibilities and empowering the community in collaboration with those within the situation.

In the following sections, I will further elaborate on how these four steps are implemented and serve the purposes of this research.

2.2 Faith Seeking Articulation: Accessing Lived Theology through Ethnographic Research

The first task, “Faith Seeking Articulation,” aims to transcend superficial descriptions and unearth the theological significance inherent in everyday life—to “find,” as Marti puts it, the implicit theologies within lived experiences rather than imposing pre-conceived theological frameworks.⁷⁵

2.2.1 Understanding Lived Theology

A series of Sabrina Müller's recent works on “lived theology” offers compelling insights on this task. Her 2019 publication, drawing on Luther's Reformation principle of the common priesthood, validates the theological contributions of lay

⁷⁵ Gerardo Marti, “Found Theologies versus Imposed Theologies: Remarks on Theology and Ethnography from a Sociological Perspective,” *Ecclesial Practices* 3 (2016):157-72.

individuals⁷⁶—often relegated to the role of “volunteer” and perceived as lacking theological expertise—by recognizing their faith experiences and interpretations as legitimate sources of theological insight, irrespective of formal theological education. This resonates deeply with the present study's motivation. Müller describes lived theology as grounded in individual context and life, becoming theology, whether verbally or performatively, when it resonates within a public space. Furthermore, Müller's 2023 work refines her definition of lived theology as “the individually constructed, personally verified, and rhythmized theology of the individualized person that is integrated into everyday life”.⁷⁷ This clarifies that lived theology is not simply a description of religious experiences, but rather an authentic, first-person theological articulation by the participants.

While acknowledging the inherent ambiguity or “messiness” of everyday experience,⁷⁸ and embracing the idea that “lived theology develops, changes, and expands through religious experiences and aims at a changed perception and shaping of the self and the world,” Müller nonetheless emphasizes the necessity of appropriate articulation and expression, even if not in traditional theological forms. This very much echoes Rowan Williams's emphasis on the communicative aspect of theology, and necessitates engagement with other tasks within a broader theological framework.

Regarding the relationship between lived theology and practical theology, while many scholars tend to subsume the former under the latter,⁷⁹ Müller's position remains somewhat ambiguous. Müller's 2019 work positions practical (or academic

⁷⁶ Sabrina Müller, *Lived Theology: Impulses for a Pastoral Theology of Empowerment* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021).

⁷⁷ Sabrina Müller, *Religious Experience and Its Transformational Power: Qualitative and Hermeneutic Approaches to a Practical Theological Foundational Concept* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, 2023), 211-12.

⁷⁸ See Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 28.

⁷⁹ Knut Tveitereid, “Lived Theology and Theology in the Lived,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, ed. Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 75.

“pastoral”) theology⁸⁰ as a “midwife” for lived theology, facilitating articulation for lay believers.⁸¹ Her 2023 work, however, emphasizes lived theology as practical theology “from below.” Despite the fluidity of these concepts, both perspectives can be accommodated within the iterative dynamics of the pastoral cycle. When the project's goal is presenting a specific group's lived theology, other tasks within the pastoral cycle can provide the summation, refinement, reflection, and rigorous articulation necessary for such a presentation. However, if, as in the present study, the aim is reflection and transformation, lived theology, with its inherent situatedness and bottom-up nature, serves as a fitting starting point for the pastoral cycle. Müller's concept of lived theology, while insightful, has been subject to critical discussion. Tveitereid, for instance, argues that her emphasis on the individual, while valuable, could be broadened to consider the influence of larger social units on theological expression.⁸² This critique highlights the potential for group dynamics and peer pressure to shape individual articulations of faith, a factor this study addresses through methodological strategies designed to encourage independent expression. Furthermore, while Müller acknowledges the importance of critical thinking, her focus on the constructive aspects of lived theology might overlook the fact that lived theology can be complex and even problematic.⁸³ This potential complexity reinforces the need for rigorous methodologies, such as the ethnographic approach employed in this study, to carefully analyze and interpret the theological insights emerging from lived experience.

⁸⁰ Clarifying Müller's terminology, particularly "pastoral theology" and "practical theology," presents a challenge, as she acknowledges a lack of unified understanding for these concepts, much like "lived theology." Attempting a parallel, she notes that in the Catholic understanding, pastoral theology often corresponds to what Protestants call practical theology, encompassing "all dimensions and areas of ecclesial action." However, she distinguishes her use of "pastoral theology" by referencing Fürst and Merkel's definition: "an academic reflection on the mission of the church, specifically concerning pastoral ministry." Throughout her work, Müller's usage of "pastoral theology" and "practical theology" is relatively flexible, even overlapping at times. However, she generally emphasizes the established, academic language associated with these concepts, particularly in contrast to the more marginalized "lived theology" in academic fields. Thus, she emphasizes the potential contribution of established theological disciplines to the development and articulation of lived theology. Müller, *Lived Theology*, 75.

⁸¹ Müller, *Lived Theology*, 75.

⁸² Tveitereid, "Lived Theology and Theology in the Lived," 75.

⁸³ As Ward reminds, "not all lived theology is good." See Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 79.

Given the emphasis on lived experience and the culturally embedded nature of theological understanding, this study employs a qualitative data collection approach. Ethnography, with its primary interest in “shared and learned patterns of values, behaviors, beliefs, and language”⁸⁴, emerges as the appropriate qualitative tool for this study.

2.2.2 The Role of Ethnography

Ethnography, as characterized by Clifford Geertz's concept of “thick description,” provides researchers with a nuanced understanding of the complex web of meanings inherent in cultural practices. As a qualitative method, it can reveal shared cultural patterns rooted in a concrete community⁸⁵ and explore how individual experiences, relationships, and contexts shape understandings of the divine, subsequently informing actions and choices.⁸⁶ This makes ethnography a favored tool for researchers exploring lived theology.

However, practical theologians hold divergent views on ethnography's role. Some consider ethnography itself as theology,⁸⁷ or ethnographic interviews as a form of theological practice.⁸⁸ Conversely, others, such as Spickard, argue for maintaining a clear distinction between ethnography and theology, emphasizing the importance of preserving ethnographic integrity as a rigorous method of empirical data collection, with theological reflection following as a distinct, secondary stage to avoid biasing

⁸⁴ See John Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2007), 90, 291.

⁸⁵ David M. Fetterman, *Ethnography: Step-by-Step*, 3rd ed. (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2010), 125–26. See also, Easten Law, "Orienting a Transnational Lived Theology for Asian America: Becoming Friends on the Way," *Theology Today* 79, no. 4 (2023): 413. {410–21}

⁸⁶ Mary Clark Moschella, "Ethnography," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Oxford, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 224–33.

⁸⁷ Moschella, citing Mellott, suggests that ethnography can itself become a form of theology, particularly when approached with "prayerful beholding and attentiveness." See Moschella, *Ethnography*, 228; See also, David M. Mellott, *I Was, and I Am Dust: Penitente Practices as a Way of Knowing* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 91. This approach finds echoes in Christian Scharen and Aana Marie Vigen, eds., *Ethnography as Christian Theology and Ethics* (London; New York: Continuum, 2011).

⁸⁸ Mary Clark Moschella, *Ethnography as a Pastoral Practice: An Introduction* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2008).

data acquisition.⁸⁹ Spickard's caution merits consideration. However, anthropologists like Tim Ingold critique the reduction of ethnography to mere data gathering, providing a necessary complement.⁹⁰ Ingold emphasizes genuine engagement and respectful interaction, recognizing the agency and personhood of participants. He therefore highlights the importance of ethnographic interviews as opportunities for authentic encounters.

This also raises the question of the researcher's role in theological construction. As noted, proponents of the "ethnographic trend," such as Wigg-Stevenson, emphasize the intersubjective co-creation of theological knowledge within the interview setting.⁹¹ This aligns with Clifford and Marcus's argument that ethnographic knowledge is not objectively gathered but constructed through the dialogical, political, and textual dynamics of the ethnographic encounter, resulting in an inherently partial truth.⁹² It means, undeniably, my interviews (and prior interactions) shape, and perhaps even "construct," certain perspectives and forms of expression. However, as Marti cautions, this does not justify "imposing" the researcher's presumptions onto participant articulations,⁹³ particularly given my pre-existing personal relationships and rapport with them. Therefore, a conscious effort to balance and maintain a degree of non-directiveness in the interviews is necessary.

Therefore, within this spectrum of approaches, my methodology involves presenting the collated interview data in Task 1, followed by further theological analysis in subsequent tasks. This separation ensures that the participants' voices are clearly presented before the introduction of my own interpretive framework in the following tasks.

While Müller favors the inductive nature of grounded theory, allowing theories to

⁸⁹ James Spickard, "The Porcupine Tango: What Ethnography Can and Cannot Do for Theologians," *Ecclesial Practices* 3 (2016): 173–81.

⁹⁰ Tim Ingold, "That's Enough about Ethnography!" *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4, no. 1 (2014): 384–5.

⁹¹ Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*, 9, 47.

⁹² James Clifford, "Introduction: Partial Truths," in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 2, 6-7.

⁹³ Marti, "Found Theologies versus Imposed Theologies," 167-68.

emerge from the data and thus realizing her “from below” approach, Swee Sum Lam suggests that this complete reliance on data, setting aside all presumptions, may lack safeguards for ensuring “theological integrity”.⁹⁴ Therefore, this study employs ethnography with thematic analysis to balance these concerns. This approach attends to participant context and allows their voices to emerge while simultaneously employing theological themes to frame the ethnographic data, maintaining both “thickness” and focus. Furthermore, this approach is particularly adept at capturing the diversity of lived experience, advantageous for reflecting the fluidity of lived theology, especially within the context of this study's two generations of lay leaders. Furthermore, as Marti notes, citing Rachelle Green, ethnography can serve as a critical pedagogy, enabling practical theologians, through immersive engagement, to discern power dynamics and uncover inequalities.⁹⁵ This explains the growing use of ethnographic methods in organizational and leadership research, as noted by Karin Klenke.⁹⁶ She observes that prolonged engagement and rich description facilitate exploration of the emic perspective on leadership dynamics, illuminating how leaders perceive their roles, manage relationships, and navigate team structures and dynamics—aspects essential to this study's focus on leadership teams.

2.2.3 Metaphorical Images as a Window into Lived Theology

Müller observes that non-ordained individuals often remain silent in church discussions, feeling they lack the authority and vocabulary necessary for formal theological discourse.⁹⁷ Tveitereid's concept of “reification,” the process of formalizing lived experience by “giving it form and name,” is particularly helpful at this

⁹⁴ Swee Sum Lam, “Theology and Qualitative Research: Limits and New Directions,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, ed. Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2022), 497n9.

⁹⁵ Gerardo Marti, “Ethnography as a Tool for Genuine Surprise: Found Theologies Versus Imposed Theologies,” in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Theology and Qualitative Research*, ed. Pete Ward and Knut Tveitereid (Hoboken: Wiley Blackwell, 2022), 477.

⁹⁶ Karin Klenke, Suzanne Stigler Martin, and J. Randall Wallace, *Qualitative Research in the Study of Leadership*, 2nd edition (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2016).

⁹⁷ Müller, *Lived Theology*, 66.

point.⁹⁸ As Tveitereid explains,

“Lived theology – at least for research purposes – could be seen as a negotiation of theological participation and reification. We could regard it as an interplay between old and new theological reifications (words, artifacts, texts, rooms, books, liturgies, concepts, etc.) and old and new theological participation (activities, relations, places, networks, habits, membership, practices, etc.).”⁹⁹

This bidirectional refinement of “reification” concretizes Marti’s concept of “finding” theology and expands upon Müller’s advocacy for lay “theological literacy” by recognizing diverse forms as potential embodiments of lived theology. Indeed, this resonates with Müller’s recent research utilizing participant-drawn images (pictures) as a starting point.¹⁰⁰ The present study will demonstrate how imagery expressions, frequently overlapping with metaphors, can similarly achieve this within language. Metaphors, as Leete suggests, are crucial for ethnographic research, offering entrances into how cultures conceptualize and experience reality. They are not simply literary devices but rather entrances for understanding how cultures conceptualize and experience reality. They are not mere literary devices but tools for understanding the lived experience within a culture, illuminating its often unspoken rules, beliefs, and emotional landscapes. This rationale underlies the present study’s focus on metaphorical images, developed and employed by lay leaders to articulate their ecclesial leadership theology.

A thematic approach to understanding lived theology, particularly through the analysis of theological images—metaphors and figurative language imbued with religious significance—offers a compelling framework for “Faith Seeking Articulation.” Thematic analysis, as outlined by Greg Guest et al., provides an inductive yet flexible methodology for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within

⁹⁸ Tveitereid, “Lived Theology and Theology in the Lived,” 70–73, where he borrows the concept from Wenger’s theory of meaning. See Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁹⁹ Tveitereid, “Lived Theology and Theology in the Lived,” 71.

¹⁰⁰ Sabrina Müller, “Beyond Theory and Practice: Lived Theology and Its Intersection with Empirical Theology,” *Open Theology* 10 (2024): 20240014.

qualitative data.¹⁰¹ By identifying patterns in the use of metaphorical images and their associated narratives and meanings, the research can uncover shared understandings and potential divergences in leadership conceptions and practices. Analyzing and interpreting these images serves as the primary means of articulating the lived theology of leadership within this study's specific context. Furthermore, this approach offers “pragmatic” allowances for the subject matter, enabling the incorporation of pre-existing knowledge or theoretical frameworks to inform the analysis, even while prioritizing “bottom-up” thematic development.¹⁰²

Given the significance of metaphors in ethnography, Leete cautions against assuming they automatically bridge the interpretive gap between researcher and participant.¹⁰³ Understanding a culture's metaphors requires careful attention to shared contexts and sensitivity to potential misinterpretations. While metaphors illuminate the richness and complexity of human experience in ways literal descriptions cannot, they also present a “narrow gate” to understanding, necessitating the following discussion of the second task.

2.3 Faith Seeking Collaboration: Navigating the Interdisciplinary Landscape

The interpretive task in practical theology, as situated within Osmer's pastoral cycle, serves as a crucial bridge between observation and theological reflection. He depicts that the theories, functioning like maps, guide the researcher through the complex terrain of lived experience. However, this terrain is not easily charted, and the map analogy reveals both the potential and the pitfalls of interdisciplinary engagement.

2.3.1 The Challenges of Interdisciplinary Research

¹⁰¹ Greg Guest, Kathleen M. MacQueen, and Emily E. Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2012), 4. Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (Los Angeles: SAGE, 2022).

¹⁰² Guest, et al., *Applied Thematic Analysis*, 20.

¹⁰³ Art Leete, "Ethnography and Metaphors," *Journal of Ethnology and Folkloristics* 15, no. 1 (2021): i–vi.

Grounded in the “communicative model of rationality,”¹⁰⁴ Osmer proposes a form of “sage wisdom” for discerning and judiciously employing the most appropriate theory, while acknowledging its inherent limitations. This discerning approach within the inherent tensions of interdisciplinarity stemming from a lineage encompassing Paul Tillich's apologetics,¹⁰⁵ David Tracy's “analogical imagination,”¹⁰⁶ and Don Browning's correlational model.¹⁰⁷ Indeed, the very nature of practical theology necessitates correlation with other disciplines. However, while enriching, this spirit of “dialogue with the other” presents the dilemma identified by Joyce Ann Mercer: the potential for theologians, as “amateurs” in other disciplines,¹⁰⁸ to be overwhelmed by their multiplicity. Beyond this unwieldy complexity, as Miller-McLemore cautions, the very act of employing a theory risks reductionism, potentially obscuring crucial aspects of lived experience.¹⁰⁹

2.3.2 Thick Description as an Interdisciplinary Bridge

First, Matteo Bortolini and Andrea Cossu contend that “thick description,” a primary feature of ethnography advanced by Geertz, also has significant interdisciplinary implications.¹¹⁰ It functions as both a disciplinary anchor within anthropology and a bridge to other fields. As showcased in works like *Deep Play: Notes on Balinese Cockfight*,¹¹¹ Geertz demonstrates how the detailed interpretation of culturally embedded actions provides a framework applicable to diverse fields beyond

¹⁰⁴ Osmer, *Practical Theology*, 100–103.

¹⁰⁵ See Müller, *Lived Theology*, 29–30.

¹⁰⁶ Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 94–95. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (London: SCM Press, 1981).

¹⁰⁷ Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 95–96. Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

¹⁰⁸ Joyce Ann Mercer, “Interdisciplinarity as a Practical Theological Conundrum,” in *Conundrums in Practical Theology*, ed. Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore and Joyce Ann Mercer (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2016), 163–98.

¹⁰⁹ Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore, “Is Qualitative Research the Best or Only Way to Study Lived Theology?” *Ecclesial Practices* 10 (2023): 157–64.

¹¹⁰ Matteo Bortolini and Andrea Cossu, “In the Field but Not of the Field: Clifford Geertz, Robert Bellah, and the Practices of Interdisciplinarity,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 23, no. 3 (2020): 328–49.

¹¹¹ Clifford Geertz, “Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight,” in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 56–86, originally published 1972.

anthropology, including history, literary criticism, and other social sciences. This approach solidified his influence and contributed significantly to the broader “interpretive turn” in the social sciences and humanities.¹¹² By elucidating the nuanced layers of meaning within cultural practices, “thick description” invites scholars from diverse disciplines to engage in dialogue and explore the complex interplay between action, meaning, and cultural context. This ability to connect detailed ethnographic analysis with broader theoretical concerns about interpretation is key to understanding Geertz's interdisciplinary impact. Browning's concept of “thick description,” drawing heavily on Geertz, embodies a similar consideration. It is demonstrated in Browning's emphasis on asking “thick questions,” which, by addressing specific dimensions, establish a preliminary framework for understanding, even if those dimensions themselves remain open to discussion.¹¹³

2.3.3 Metaphor as a Tool for Theological Interpretation

Second, metaphorical images also play a crucial role in bridging disciplines within practical theology, generating new understanding. Art Leete, drawing on Lakoff and Johnson's *Metaphors We Live By*, highlights the cognitive power of metaphors, arguing they are fundamental to how we perceive and interpret the world. In ethnographic research, metaphors become vital for both the researcher making sense of cultural practices and the reader grasping the nuances of the culture being studied. They bridge the gap between lived experience and ethnographic knowledge, making complex realities more accessible and relatable. Leete's work addresses the “crisis of representation” in ethnography identified by Marcus and Fischer, which highlights the challenge of translating complex cultural realities into accurate narratives. Metaphors provide a means to navigate this challenge, offering a shared space for meaning-making.¹¹⁴

Metaphorical expressions, offering multifaceted interpretations, are prevalent across academic and practical research, including practical theology. Miller-McLemore's

¹¹² Matteo Bortolini and Andrea Cossu, “In the Field but Not of the Field: Clifford Geertz, Robert Bellah, and the Practices of Interdisciplinarity,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 23, no. 3 (2020): 328–49.

¹¹³ Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, 105–9, 134–35.

¹¹⁴ Leete, “Ethnography and Metaphors,” i.

“living human web” exemplifies this. In *Ethnographic Theology*, Wigg-Stevenson uses images like “cogs in the machine” and “my mother’s hips” to illuminate the interplay between doctrinal theology and lived experience.¹¹⁵ Similarly, in *Images of Pastoral Care*, Dykstra argues that even contested images help navigate the ambiguities of pastoral care, promoting self-understanding and critical reflection.¹¹⁶ These scholars demonstrate how metaphorical images, much like Lakoff and Johnson’s metaphors, shape our understanding of complex theological concepts and lived experience. This aligns with Leete, and Lakoff and Johnson’s, view of metaphors as tools for comprehension and meaning making, not objective descriptions. Lakoff and Johnson assert that finding apt metaphors is crucial for fostering shared understanding across diverse experiences, including self-interpretation, which they argue is inherently relational.

2.3.4 Forming an Interdisciplinary “Seeking Team”

The inherent act of “seeking” in Ward’s concept of “faith seeking understanding” provides a cohesive framework for convening diverse disciplines into an integrated “seeking team.” This team respects the distinct contributions and boundaries of each discipline while critically integrating their respective insights to foster a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complex issues facing practical theology. Therefore, correlational interactions from various disciplines—such as cultural studies, organizational studies, and missiology—alongside ethnographic research within diverse communities and practical theological studies on specific issues or theological concepts, becomes essential to this study. This multi-faceted approach ensures that the interpretive task remains both rigorous and faithful to the multifaceted nature of human experience.

Prioritizing the lived theology of the concrete community provides the crucial starting point and overarching framework. This prioritization establishes God as the theologian’s primary orientation. Consequently, interdisciplinary engagement is driven by the pursuit of a more comprehensive understanding of God’s work in the

¹¹⁵ Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology*, 81-85, 147-149.

¹¹⁶ Robert C. Dykstra, “Introduction,” in *Images of Pastoral Care: Classic Readings*, ed. Robert C. Dykstra (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2005), 12.

world. Within this study's adapted pastoral cycle, this faith-driven purpose acts as a guiding principle, preventing unfocused interdisciplinary exploration. Furthermore, Alister McGrath's concept of theoretical attentiveness (originally theological attentiveness) complements Osmer's "sage wisdom" by illuminating the dynamic interplay between theoretical understanding and empirical observation within specific contexts.¹¹⁷ Although McGrath focuses on Christianity, this "attentiveness," as noted, can be broadened to encompass multiple disciplines, fostering a multi-perspectival approach that mitigates the limitations of individual theories. This multi-perspectival approach can be visualized as using multiple telescopes, each with its own unique scope and sensitivity. Just as different telescopes reveal different aspects of the cosmos, so too do different theories illuminate distinct facets of lived experience. While a comprehensive a priori understanding of each theory's limitations is desirable, the practical reality necessitates ongoing reflexive dialogue and iterative engagement.

2.4 Faith Seeking Connection in Christ: Navigating Authority and Identity within the Church

The previous task, by framing theology as a seeking orientation, partially circumvented the tensions and struggles inherent in interdisciplinary approaches. However, within the context of Christian churches, the sensitive topic of authority inevitably arises: should theology assume a privileged normative position in interdisciplinary dialogue?

2.4.1 The Interplay of Authority and Identity

This struggle resonates with another "riddle" mentioned by Mercer: Practical theology's reliance on interdisciplinary dialogue, which defines its unique contribution, simultaneously threatens its distinct identity and risks marginalization within academia.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, this identity crisis is also present within various Christian denominations and traditions, where internal tensions are no less

¹¹⁷ Alister McGrath, "The Cultivation of Theological Vision: Theological Attentiveness and the Practice of Ministry," in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. Pete Ward (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 107–23.

¹¹⁸ Mercer, *Interdisciplinarity as a Practical Theological Conundrum*, 164.

pronounced than those between Christianity and other disciplines, presenting an unavoidable challenge.

2.4.2 Diverse Perspectives on Theological Authority

This identity struggle is arguably implicit in Osmer's four-task framework. While diverse theories are introduced in the “interpretive task,” his extended discussion of cross-disciplinary engagement and correlational models is strategically located within the “normative task” chapter. This placement arguably reinforces theology's authority in practical decision-making by emphasizing the interdisciplinary nature of ethical discernment. However, his approach resembles a careful management of the issue rather than a direct engagement with the inherent power dynamics as well as the identity negotiation, and thus, may not fully capture the complex interplay between historical human experience and the diverse reflections of faith within various communities entangled in Christian traditions, which represents a lived reality rather than an idealized normativity.

The “Chalcedonian model” also attempts to resolve this challenge of authority by using the inseparable, unconfused, and unchangeable union of Christ's divine and human natures as an analogy for the relationship between theology and other disciplines. It employs “asymmetry” to emphasize theology's transcendence without diminishing or excluding other fields.¹¹⁹ Similarly, Watkins, in discussing four theological voices—operant, espoused, normative, and formal—articulates an “asymmetric” relationship even within theology, implicitly positioning the latter two voices as superior.¹²⁰ While these models contribute to locating theology's identity within interdisciplinary discourse, they do not resolve the theological tensions within the “divine” identity (or, identities) itself.

Other approaches emphasize Christian distinctiveness by focusing on the discernment of divine action. For example, Andrew Root identifies transcendent

¹¹⁹ Deborah van Deusen Hunsinger, *Theology and Pastoral Counselling: A New Interdisciplinary Approach* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 89–121.

¹²⁰ Clare Watkins, *Disclosing Church: An Ecclesiology Learned from Conversations in Practice* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2020), 43.

experiences, particularly encounters with God, within his interviewees' lives, connecting these to God's *ex nihilo* creative power.¹²¹ Underlying such approaches is a “critical realism” adopted by several influential practical theologians.¹²² Critical realism rejects both “naive realism” (the belief that human concepts directly access ultimate reality) and excessive agnosticism (the view that reality is merely a social construct). Instead, Root posits a reality beyond the explanatory scope of other disciplines—specifically, the reality of divine action as an authority transcending human reason, encompassing various disciplinary perspectives, and even exceeding Christian traditions (inherited by human communities). However, such approaches risk a “God of the gaps” fallacy. Root is correct that lived reality is a necessary focus in practical theology, converging “secular” disciplines and theological traditions. However, higher authority should not be predicated solely on the limitations of the disciplines or traditions in reality.

2.4.3 Grounding Authority in Reality

In *Resurrection and Moral Order*, Oliver O'Donovan offers a valuable perspective on the crucial relationship between reality and authority. He argues that “reality is the point on which both freedom and authority rest.”¹²³ This “reality” refers to the objective order of creation, which is neither inert nor value-free. It is objective and given, not something constructed or chosen, but rather rooted in God's created order of the world. This objective reality forms the foundation for authority, which, consequently, is not an externally imposed normativity but arises from reality itself. Furthermore, O'Donovan presents Christ as the embodiment of this restored creation. Christ's unique authority stems not solely from his divinity, but from his role as the embodiment and vindication of the moral order, particularly through the resurrection. Thus, Christ's authority is inseparable from the authority of reality itself.

¹²¹ Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), 229–32.

¹²² Andrew Wright, *Christianity and Critical Realism: Ambiguity, Truth and Theological Literacy* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 13–15. Pete Ward, *Liquid Ecclesiology: The Gospel and the Church* (Boston: Brill, 2017), 23. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2016), 64–68.

¹²³ Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline of Evangelical Ethics* (Leicester, England: Apollos, 1994), 88.

Finally, O'Donovan posits that scriptural authority derives from its witness to Christ, the ultimate revelation of God's restorative work. Scripture is not an independent authority but a means of encountering Christ, and through him, the authoritative reality of the restored creation. Thus, O'Donovan stresses the importance of Christological scriptural interpretation, with Christ serving as the lens for understanding God's purposes.¹²⁴

While theologically affirming Christian identity, O'Donovan's insights offer other disciplines, even those outside a Christian worldview, a potential basis for legitimate engagement through their possible grasp of the authority of reality. However, he also emphasizes the need for epistemic humility across all disciplines, including theology and the sciences. Each discipline's perspective constitutes a historically situated, provisional and partial knowledge of both reality and scripture, and does not possess any prequalified or transcendent status simply by virtue of its source of authority. O'Donovan argues against understanding knowledge as a collection of disparate parts from various disciplines, emphasizing instead the cohesive "totality" of God's created reality. He contends that fragmented knowledge distorts our understanding of the good, much like Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony* would misrepresent a complete symphony. True understanding, according to O'Donovan, requires "knowledge in Christ," where Christ, as the Logos, reveals the interconnectedness of creation and its relationship to God, providing the necessary lens for comprehending the whole. This approach of epistemology, therefore, is not simply accumulating facts but a continuous deepening of our understanding of this divinely revealed order.

"For an analogy we may think of what it is to study a great picture; beginning from the first superficial glance, which takes in the picture whole but as yet entirely without insight, and going on for a lifetime, always discovering 'new' things, which are yet not new but were there in the picture from the first."¹²⁵

This iterative process guided by the principles and values Christ reveals necessitates repentance, a continuous reorientation away from human errors and towards the truth embodied in Christ, enabling us to grasp the "new" vision of reality.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 76–92.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 92.

O'Donovan's approach establishes a clear theological identity rooted in a particular understanding of reality, thereby avoiding the "God of the gaps" fallacy. It resonates with the shared starting point of "faith seeking understanding" based on this shared reality, with Christ as the central authority and source of normativity. Crucially, it provides a focal point for diverse knowledge disciplines and Christian traditions to humbly engage in the pursuit of a "greater picture" in Christ.

2.4.4 Metaphors and the Construction of Reality

O'Donovan's proposal resonates with numerous other theologians, although not necessarily with the idea of a singular "picture." For instance, his emphasis on scripture shaping our understanding of reality finds an echo in the work of Sallie McFague, who argues that biblical metaphors actively construct our understanding of reality rather than merely describing it. McFague contends that metaphors such as kingdom of God or God the Father do not simply illustrate pre-existing ideas; they actively shape our understanding of these concepts, influencing our values, beliefs, and actions by framing our experiences within these metaphorical structures.¹²⁶

This perspective finds a particularly strong resonance in the work of biblical scholars like Paul S. Minear.¹²⁷ In *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, Minear explores the richness of biblical imagery, arguing that the New Testament's thought world, steeped in metaphor and analogy, requires an interpretive approach that moves beyond the mere extraction of abstract principles. Minear's work resonates with both O'Donovan and McFague, despite their differing theological frameworks. Like O'Donovan, Minear emphasizes a holistic, Christ-centered understanding, seeing Christ refracted through the prism of ecclesial imagery.¹²⁸ Both also stress the limitations of human knowledge and advocate for continuous engagement with scripture.¹²⁹ The resonance with McFague lies in their shared recognition of the

¹²⁶ Sallie McFague, *Speaking in Parables: A Study in Metaphor and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 38-41, 42-45.

¹²⁷ Paul S. Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 247.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 11-27. See Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 195.

constitutive power of metaphor.¹³⁰ Echoing McFague's argument that metaphors shape our understanding of religious concepts and the world, Minear highlights how such images shape the church's self-perception. This approach, he argues, fosters a more holistic understanding, avoids proof-texting, and stimulates the imagination, leading to a deeper grasp of the church's nature and mission.

This discussion explores a methodological possibility; a key focus in the analysis of this study in following chapters is the role and influence of these metaphors within real communities, particularly their relationship with biblical authority.

2.4.5 Reconciling Christopraxis and Lived Experience

While O'Donovan's Christocentric approach provides a general direction, operational gaps remain, many already recognized within practical theology, which this section will address. Osmer's four tasks model, inheriting the pastoral cycle's task-oriented approach, emphasizes problem-solving in church practice. While capable of circumventing interdisciplinary struggles as shown above, this model still risks reducing Christ (and other authorities) to mere identity markers or instruments for problem-solving. This presents a significant risk for other practical theology approaches, such as Ray Anderson's, as described by Ward. Anderson understands practical theology as the continuing ministry of Christ through the Holy Spirit, emphasizing theology's inherent practicality due to Christ's presence. He rejects artificial methodological constructs that force connections between theology and practice, likening them to "fitting orthopedic devices to theoretical concepts in order to make them walk."¹³¹ Instead, he prioritizes recognizing God's active presence in our lives, which stimulates reflection and reveals the living Word, analogous to the Emmaus Road encounter.

Anderson's emphasis, as Ward notes, highlights the (ironically often overlooked)

¹³⁰ McFague, *Speaking in Parables*, 31-45.

¹³¹ Ray S. Anderson, *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering Ministry with Theological Praxis* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2001), 29.

significance of God in practical theology,¹³² strongly emphasizing Christ's authority and practical theology's identity. However, the practicality of Anderson's Christopraxis remains a question. Andrew Root's attempt, based on Anderson's proposal, focuses "Presence" specifically on "Divine Actions."¹³³ Yet, practical theology, particularly lived theology, often addresses more mundane, institutional, even repetitive tasks and daily interpersonal interactions within church communities. How does Christopraxis manifest within these experiences without falling into the pitfall of imposing presumed "divine" frameworks?

Charles Marsh, in his discussion of lived theology, highlights his study of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, particularly the phrase "Christ exists as community" from *Sanctorum Communio*. This underpins lived theology by emphasizing the relational and communal nature of Christian faith.¹³⁴ Marsh's engagement with Bonhoeffer is evident in his adoption of the phrase "from the phraseological to the real." Interestingly, while this direction appears to move from theology to practice, it actually emphasizes lived experience's formative influence on theology. Indeed, within the development of practical theology, this interplay between reality and theology, specifically Christ's presence, finds its roots in Bonhoeffer, evolving through Ray Anderson's extensive study of Bonhoeffer and his own constructive work.

This has formed a significant, yet often under-examined, strand influencing contemporary practical theologians, including Andrew Root and Chloe Lynch. Considering the data's relevance, this study examines the lived theology reflected in GMBC alongside the work of Anderson and Lynch, tracing their connections back to Bonhoeffer, particularly regarding the relationship between church, leadership, and Christ's presence. Echoing Natalie Wigg-Stevenson's call "from proclamation to

¹³² Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 112.

¹³³ Andrew Root, *Christopraxis: A Practical Theology of the Cross* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 2014), 26.

¹³⁴ Charles Marsh, "Introduction: Lived Theology: Method, Style, and Pedagogy," in *Lived Theology: New Perspectives on Method, Style, and Pedagogy*, ed. Charles Marsh, Peter Slade, and Sarah Azaransky (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 1–20.

conversation,”¹³⁵ this in-depth dialogue not only utilizes Christopraxis as a framework for examining GMBC but also employs insights from a living community as GMBC to critically assess the evolution and practical implications of the “Christocentric school” as a living tradition. Furthermore, it provides a church community, especially an “independent” church community, with vocabulary and connections to a broader theological landscape within Christianity. In other words, it seeks communal relationships in Christ through “mutual enrichment.”¹³⁶

2.5 Faith Seeking Transformation: Empowering Change within the Community

This pastoral cycle concludes by focusing on practical applications. Practical theology, as we know, does not offer a set of prescribed instructions or easy answers. Transforming a community requires an internal process. While the previous stages have shed light on lived theology and identified key issues through analysis, transformation, as Ward rightly points out, is “charged with emotions and commitments,”¹³⁷ making change potentially very difficult. However, this difficulty also reminds us of a core purpose of practical theology: *education*. Although the paradigm has shifted from a one-way “applied theology” to a more dialogical approach, this emphasis on theological education fostering a community's maturity and responsibility in both thought and action has remained constant.

This also resonates with Müller's motivation for establishing lived theology: to empower lay people through a deeper understanding of how faith can inform their actions, fostering purposeful living and meaningful community engagement. This, in turn, strengthens their self-esteem and confidence in engaging with theological matters. The essence is not only to express theology through their experiences but also to consider practical application and renewal from their perspective.

¹³⁵ Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, “From Proclamation to Conversation: Ethnographic Disruptions to Theological Normativity,” *Palgrave Communications* 1 (2015), accessed April 28, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1057/palcomms.2015.24>.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 66–67.

Another unavoidable perspective on praxis is healing pains, particularly relational wounds, as reflected in the literature discussed in the previous chapter and evident in the GMBC leadership narratives presented in the next. Nicholas Adams advocates a “reparative” approach to address divisions within Christian traditions.¹³⁸ Drawing on Peter Ochs's framework, Adams emphasizes that reparative reasoning utilizes suffering and doubt as catalysts for change, focusing on collective growth and renewal rather than individual enlightenment.¹³⁹ Instead of perpetuating debates by taking sides, this approach seeks to heal underlying fractures by dismantling false oppositions. This involves rethinking fundamental categories and assumptions, offering new perspectives that transcend current discourse and enable communities to collaboratively wrestle with challenges and seek transformative solutions. Considering this, the empowering potential of metaphors merits reiteration. Consistent with the preceding discussion, Lakoff and Johnson emphasize that transforming practices begins within our “conceptual system,” largely structured by metaphors deeply connected to and shaping our values, beliefs, and self-understanding.¹⁴⁰ As Ward highlights, our lived theology is often inconsistent and even contradictory—that is also the case of the metaphors within our conceptual systems. However, this inconsistency can be a source of creativity. As Lakoff and Johnson argue, different metaphors illuminate different facets of a concept, fostering a richer, more nuanced understanding. Creativity can arise from blending existing metaphors, challenging or rejecting them, and creating new ones that better reflect our experiences. This can be a powerful force for change, enabling us to reframe our understanding of ourselves and the world. This introduces the concept of “experiential flexibility”—the ability to shift between metaphorical framings and adapt our understanding to new experiences. Moreover, Osmer's deliberate choice to conclude his exploration of the four tasks with a case study of leadership renewal within a church is noteworthy. These leaders, experiencing firsthand pain and struggle, acknowledge the cost and risk inherent in leading change. Yet, they also recognize the crucial importance of connecting vision to action. Leaders cast vision,

¹³⁸ Nicholas Adams, “Arguing as a Theological Practice,” in *The Routledge Companion to the Practice of Christian Theology*, ed. Michael Higon and James Fodor (New York: Routledge, 2015), 43–60.

¹³⁹ Nicholas Adams, “Reparative Reasoning,” *Modern Theology* 24, no. 3 (July 2008):447–57.

¹⁴⁰ George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 205.

build coalitions, empower others, and navigate the complexities of change. This, too, represents both the starting point and the objective of this research.

While presented as distinct stages, the boundaries between these four tasks of Faith Seeking are not clear-cut. The process is dynamic and iterative, with each stage informing and enriching the others. For example, the initial articulation of lived theology inevitably involves interpretation, and the collaborative integration of perspectives necessitates ongoing reflection on the community's expressed faith. Similarly, the dialogical engagement with tradition shapes both the interpretation and articulation of lived theology, while the transformative goal influences every stage of the process. Though presented discretely for analytical clarity, these tasks are best understood as interwoven aspects of a single, holistic journey. Throughout this cyclical process, the ethnographic and theological perspectives serve as the primary threads, intertwining to explore the metaphorical images that shape the lived experience of church leadership and carry profound theological weight. Ethnographic methods provide the grounded, contextual understanding of the community's practices and beliefs, while theological reflection illuminates the deeper meanings and implications of these lived experiences. The interplay of these two disciplines, particularly in their focus on metaphors, allows for a richer and more nuanced understanding of leadership within the church community.

2.6 Research Design

Informed by this methodology, this study employs a combination of ethnographic methods—interviews, participant observation, and document analysis—to gather data. This triangulation strengthens the research by providing multiple perspectives, enhancing the validity and reliability of the findings. Semi-structured interviews with lay leaders from both generations serve as the primary data source, allowing for in-depth exploration of individual experiences and perspectives. Participant observation provides valuable contextual background and preliminary exploration to shape the research focus, while analysis of relevant church documents, particularly those reflecting leadership perspectives, offers historical context and triangulates official

narratives with interview data. The following sections detail the specific methods employed and their rationale.

2.6.1 Ethical Considerations

Given the need for in-depth engagement with personal experiences in ethnographic studies, this research draws upon David Fetterman's perspective in cultural anthropology,¹⁴¹ emphasizing that ethical considerations are not merely adherence to a set of rules, but rather an ongoing process integrated throughout the research design, data collection, analysis, and presentation. Prioritizing the protection of participants from harm, this approach aligns with Wigg-Stevenson's integration of ethical dimensions into practical theological research.¹⁴² This not only demonstrates appropriate respect for and protection of participant privacy but also underscores the importance of fostering mutually respectful and transparent relationships throughout the research process while remaining sensitive to power dynamics. This also highlights the importance of researcher reflexivity in navigating these ethical considerations.

In its initial phase, this research received ethical approval from the Durham University ethics committee (Reference number: THEO-2021-10-19T17_17_23-nmsd66) on 17 January 2022. Key dimensions encompassed the research aims and context, proposed participants (interviewees), consent procedures, and confidentiality alongside cultural sensitivity. Specifically, the ethical review confirmed that digital data would be pseudonymized and stored securely on university-approved platforms. The ethical approval process also provided valuable insights that will inform subsequent stages of the research, as detailed in the following sections.

2.6.2 Participant Selection¹⁴³

¹⁴¹ Fetterman, *Ethnography*, 133–43.

¹⁴² Natalie Wigg-Stevenson, *Ethnographic Theology: An Inquiry into the Production of Theological Knowledge* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

¹⁴³ Following the recommendations of some qualitative researchers who advocate viewing interviewees as conversational partners rather than samples or informants, this study uses the term

Fieldwork for this study spanned 27 months, from January 2022 to April 2024. The research design aimed to contact as many former and current GMBC elders as possible.¹⁴⁴ Ultimately, data collection primarily consisted of interviews with twelve GMBC elders: nine serving during the study period and three “founders” of GMBC whose service concluded before the study began.

Contacting these current elders proved straightforward, as they were long-term GMBC members, actively involved in both their professional careers and regular church activities, including weekly Sunday services. They were familiar with my work and academic pursuits and readily agreed to participate. During this period, I served as a minister(傳道) of the church, holding the organizational status of an employee, while the elders held the status of directors. Furthermore, according to GMBC's governance model, I possessed no overriding authority or power over the interviewed elders, and there are no other conflicts of interest. In the following presentation of the research, they are pseudonymized as Nasos*, Ioannis*, Tasos*, Neofytos*, Stavros*, Kyriakos*, Gavriil*, Michail*, and Pantelis*, or collectively referred to as “second-generation elders” (following GMBC congregational terminology).

In comparison, contacting former elders presented greater challenges. Many were older, and some had left Hong Kong following retirement. My key concern was their health, since discussing past events could potentially evoke heightened emotional responses. Therefore, I consulted with individuals within the church possessing counseling expertise and familiarity with the elders before inviting them to participate in the study.¹⁴⁵ The three former elders who ultimately participated were key leaders

"participants." See Herbert J. Rubin and Irene Rubin, *Qualitative Interviewing: The Art of Hearing Data*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2005), 14–15.

¹⁴⁴ An earlier initial research design encompassed 15–20 participants, including elders, their spouses, and other church co-workers. However, to manage data volume and complexity, the study's focus narrowed to include only elders as participants.

¹⁴⁵ To avoid unnecessary speculation, I will not specify which elders were unreachable or presented health concerns. Subsequently, one founding elder did share a previously “undisclosed” and emotionally charged experience. However, his emotional state during the interview remained within the range of normal expression.

and decision-makers in GMBC's early years. I had established personal acquaintance with all three participants during my time as a student and member at GMBC, prior to becoming a minister there in 2017. Their involvement fulfilled the study's purpose and provided valuable generational diversity of perspectives. They are pseudonymized as Vasilios*, Elias*, and Marios*.

It is also important to note that participants are presented pseudonymously rather than anonymously. This is due to their distinct individual characteristics, which are significantly linked to different themes. Complete anonymization or categorization (e.g. by "generation") could obscure the data and potentially be misleading. However, this presents a challenge: participants, or those familiar with them, may recognize them through certain patterns, particularly given the academic research background of many GMBC congregants who could potentially access this dissertation through the e-thesis system. While many points raised by the elders aligned with their public statements (e.g., sermons) familiar to the congregation, some perspectives, particularly regarding church governance and historical events, were rarely expressed publicly. Therefore, I proceeded with considerable caution. I ensured they were fully informed and consented to the study's approach, particularly regarding the use of pseudonyms. I also avoided overly personal or sensitive topics in the data presentation and minimized the potential for information linkage. Specifically, regarding incidents involving other individuals, particularly employees, especially those of a conflictual nature, I have deliberately omitted detailed descriptions of the processes and particulars, as such investigations are beyond the scope of this study.¹⁴⁶

Finally, the participants were all male, reflecting the demographics of GMBC leadership since its inception. Participants' birthplaces included Taiwan, mainland China, and Singapore. All were married with children and held professional positions. While their background information is publicly available on the church's website and in its publications, specific details are omitted from this dissertation to protect participant confidentiality. Relevant background information is only included when

¹⁴⁶ The sensitive and complex issue of navigating historical conflicts within Chinese communities addressed in Yang's reflexivity, see Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 14–15.

pertinent to the research questions and explicitly addressed by the interviewees themselves.

2.6.3 Participant Observation and Church Documents Study

My interest in this research predates my doctoral program and study of practical theology. My prolonged engagement within the community informed the research design and provided valuable contextual understanding. However, recognizing the potential for bias due to this long-term involvement, I conducted intensive observations, particularly during the preliminary exploration phase from January to August, 2022. These observations encompassed worship services, church meetings, and informal lunches and conversations with elders, their families, and church co-workers. These observations provided valuable insights into their daily lives, family dynamics, and interactions with other leaders and co-workers. Furthermore, regular weekday lunches with full-time church co-workers allowed me to glean perspectives from senior pastoral staff and administrators on the previous generation of elders, including their observations on generational shifts.

These observations provided valuable insights, particularly regarding individual styles, daily faith practices, but also introduced complexities. Firstly, the observed interactions encompassed a broader range of individuals than this single study could accommodate. Secondly, my observations, while informative, could not capture the perspectives of retired founders and did not afford equal attentiveness to all current elders. Thirdly, my involvement in church affairs, particularly during the pandemic when decisions required my input, inevitably intertwined my personal perspectives, potentially influencing data interpretation. Finally, the demanding nature of ministry made sustained, intensive observation impractical. Therefore, after the initial four interviews, having refined the research focus, I ceased dedicated observations with fieldnotes while maintaining general awareness.

Another data source comprises church documents, including constitutional documents (by-laws, statements of faith, organizational structures, and mission statements), sermons (recorded and publicly available online since the 2000s), and

selected publications (annual reports, commemorative issues, and articles), which offer readily accessible and deliberately constructed perspectives. These resources reflect governance structures and leadership decisions, offering objectivity and facilitating thematic alignment with this study. Consulted alongside observations and interviews, this literature provided initial validation, helped form the interview questions, and offered crucial triangulation during data analysis. However, the extent to which these data, as the “espoused voice” intended for a congregational audience, accurately and comprehensively reflect the leaders' genuine ideas requires further exploration through interviews. In other words, these written documents serve as a supplementary role, supporting the primary ethnographic interview data of this study.

It should be noted that the use of these materials adhered to pseudonymization protocols and excluded personal or sensitive information. Despite the largely public availability of these materials, permission to access and utilize church documents, including constitutional documents and annual publications, was obtained from the Chairman of the Elders' Board (one of the elders).

2.6.4 Ethnographic Interviews

One-on-one interviews serve as the primary source of data for presentation and analysis. Semi-structured interviews were conducted conversationally. I as the researcher guided the overarching topics while allowing participants ample freedom to discuss their understanding of the church community (primarily GMBC) and their roles as church leaders, both individually and collectively, in a way that felt comfortable and natural. While the study investigates images, a focus identified during the pilot study, the interviewer avoided introducing concepts like “images” or “metaphors” or using overly leading questions such as “What image best represents the church?” However, when such imagery arose organically, follow-up questions were used for clarification as needed. Consequently, the data includes imagery alongside narratives, perspectives, personal experiences, and biblical interpretations related to participants' understanding of the church and leadership. A thorough examination of these interconnected elements is undertaken during the subsequent

thematic analysis of the data.

Due to the fluctuating Covid-19 situation in Hong Kong until 2023, initial interviews were conducted via Zoom. This format was maintained for consistency across all subsequent interviews, including those participants residing outside of Hong Kong, ensuring a comparable setting for all participants. Since the onset of the pandemic, GMBC has largely transitioned to using Zoom for meetings and pastoral care, making this a comfortable and accessible format for participants. During the zoom sessions, I appeared on camera with a visible background and in casual attire. I noticed that the majority of participants also used a visible background (a few opted for a semi-transparent background), with no instances of virtual backgrounds observed, confirming that the interviews were conducted in a private, confidential, and comfortable setting. All interviews proceeded without significant interruption, save for one or two brief pauses when participants attended to family matters. I expressed my understanding, and we resumed the interviews within minutes. While acknowledging that Zoom interactions may not fully capture the nuances of facial expressions and body language compared to in-person interviews, this method proved effective given its widespread familiarity.

All participants provided written informed consent after receiving a comprehensive information sheet detailing the research purpose, methods, data usage, and their rights, including the right to withdraw at any time (see Appendix for sample information sheet and consent form). I verbally reiterated these points at the beginning of each interview to ensure participant understanding. This included explicitly discussing pseudonym preferences and assuring participants of their right to omit any uncomfortable questions and to withdraw from the study at any time without providing a reason, with the guarantee that any related data would be subsequently removed. Following this part, participants often posed further clarifying questions or articulated their understanding of the study parameters. A key consideration, understood by participants, was the political sensitivity in Hong Kong and the decision to exclude individual perspectives on certain events from the scope

of this research.¹⁴⁷

Interviews typically lasted 1–1.5 hours. Participants were offered pseudonymized transcripts for review and comment. To maintain confidentiality and mitigate potential bias from peer pressure, I assured them that I would neither disclose other participants' views nor share transcripts, including the unexamined data chapter of this dissertation. My overall impression was that the participants possessed sharp communication and critical thinking skills, and demonstrated a high degree of trust and openness towards me. They often interacted with me as they would in typical church meetings or discussions, occasionally inquiring about my personal views or those of others. In such instances, I gently reminded them of my role as a researcher, which they readily acknowledged. Post-interview, some participants provided additional comments via WhatsApp. No participants withdrew from the study. Subsequent citations of these interviews will follow the format “interview-[pseudonym]-[date]” as detailed in the footnotes.

The following table summarizes the types of data from this study (Table 1):

Data Type	Description	Number/Duration	Time Period	Challenges/ Considerations
Semi-structured Interviews	Individual interviews with current and past elders of GMBC, exploring their understanding of leadership and metaphorical images. Conducted in Mandarin.	12 interviews (1-1.5 hours each)	July 2022 - April 2024	Health condition of the senior elders; Scheduling difficulties due to participants' busy schedules
Participant Observation	Observation of church services, meetings, and other events at GMBC.	Approx. 20 hours	January 2022 - August 2022	Balancing observation with my role as a minister.

¹⁴⁷ This consideration, consistent with the prevailing communication practices among GMBC leaders in recent years, fostered a shared understanding and avoided any discrepancies among participants.

Documentary Analysis	Review of church by-laws, statements of faith, meeting minutes, annual reports, published sermons, and Sunday school transcripts.	-	January 2022-August 2023	Fragmented nature of early church records, which hindered reconstruction of the early context.
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2.6.5 Thematic Analysis

Following Graham Gibbs’s strategy, it involves a systematic process of identifying patterns of meaning as themes within qualitative data.¹⁴⁸ This begins with familiarization with the data, followed by generating initial codes representing key ideas and concepts. Codes are then grouped into potential themes, which are reviewed and refined through constant comparison. To preserve the nuances of the original language, the coding and initial grouping were conducted directly on the Chinese transcripts using Atlas.ti software.

Finally, themes are defined, named, and used to produce a coherent report that addresses the research question, supported by illustrative examples from the data. The organization of themes used to structure codes and address research questions is not singular, and each approach has limitations. Some codes were predetermined, such as “church,” “elder,” “identity,” “value,” and “practice,” along with pre-defined code categories like “church,” “personal life,” and “workplace.” Following theoretical recommendations, in vivo codes, particularly those recurring across participants (e.g., “biblical”), were prioritized. Other codes, such as “pressure,” “crisis event,” “personal tension,” “power dynamics,” “agree/disagree,” and “adaptation,” were later categorized into different themes and further refined during analysis.

Regarding the first two research questions, the elders' frequent use of metaphorical language yielded rich imagery related to the Church and elder identity, effectively

¹⁴⁸ Graham R. Gibbs, *Analyzing Qualitative Data* (London: SAGE, 2018), 4-10.

integrating their beliefs and narratives. Prominent images such as “home,” “soldier,” and “sheep” emerged. However, concerning the third research question—their faith foundation—fewer images were used, suggesting this topic operates at a deeper level. Nevertheless, “bible” emerged as a high-frequency code, reflecting the relationship between their Christian faith and leadership concepts/images. This relationship manifests through “bible” as both “symbol” and “source,” discussed further in the next chapter.

A notable pattern within the analysis was the reflection of generational differences, though quantifying these differences beyond individual variation remains challenging. Generational differences in the use of theological imagery were observed, with the first generation employing more vivid and comprehensive imagery than the second, potentially attributable to sample size. However, this aligns with generational patterns in other GMBC publications, forming a triangulation. Therefore, the presentation maintains a generational perspective. As noted in the introduction regarding the study's arrangement, subsequent chapters will present these data thematically, followed by in-depth analysis.

2.6.6 My Reflexivity as the researcher

My dual role as a long-term member and minister at GMBC requires careful reflection on my positionality. As established in Chapter 1, my formal role within the church's leadership structure was that of a non-voting, *ex officio* participant in the Elder Board meetings. This dynamic of having a 'voice but no vote' profoundly shaped my ethnographic engagement.

This position undoubtedly granted me a privileged level of access. The elders spoke to me with the trust afforded to a long-term pastoral colleague. However, I must also acknowledge the inherent power imbalance. Throughout the interviews and my participant observation, I was constantly navigating this dual identity—being seen at times as a pastoral confidant, and at other times as a theological expert or a subordinate staff member. Being conscious of this dynamic was essential in interpreting the data and in my effort to represent the elders' perspectives with integrity.

Beyond the points, I offer further awareness regarding theological considerations and my positionality within this research. My dual role as a long-term member and minister at GMBC significantly shapes my perspective. While this deep involvement provides valuable contextual understanding and facilitates rapport, it also necessitates careful reflection on potential biases. My inherently asymmetrical relationship with the two generations of elders, particularly my potentially colored recollections of the first generation's practices due to long-term interaction, and my current collaborative relationship with the second generation did not merely risk influencing my interpretations but actively shaped the conversations themselves, generating insights that might not have emerged in a different relational context., require careful consideration. Therefore, following Marti's emphasis on attending "surprises,"¹⁴⁹ the analysis allows interview data for unexpected insights to challenge my potential presumptions.

Furthermore, my vested interest in the community's future inevitably shapes my approach. While striving for empathetic representation of all viewpoints, my closer alignment with the second generation's context and theological reflections might introduce a subtle bias towards contemporary applications. This inherent tension within practical theology requires ongoing critical self-reflection.

A further consideration in this section relates to gender—the interviewees are predominantly male. While this gender imbalance within the church leadership team is an objective reality shaped by certain traditions within Chinese churches, it represents a methodological limitation. The lack of female interviewees restricts access to lived experiences and concrete data for grounded theological reflection. This does not imply that such reflections are unimportant; on the contrary, they are crucial but currently underdeveloped. For example, during the pilot exploration phase, I talked with some of the elders' wives, observing their unique roles within the church ecosystem and leadership. However, due to constraints of scope, including them merely as supplementary figures would reinforce their marginalized status without effectively amplifying their voices. In reality, women likely play a more implicit

¹⁴⁹ Marti, "Ethnography as a Tool for Genuine Surprise," 472.

yet significant role in church leadership than typically recognized. While exploring this complex dynamic beyond the scope of the current study, it warrants further investigation in future research. My own positionality as a male researcher further shapes my perspective on this dynamic and must also be acknowledged.

Chapter 3. “Home,” “Soldiers,” and the Biblical Foundation: Unveiling the Metaphorical Images of Leadership

This chapter explores the theological landscape of leadership at Grace Mandarin Bible Church (GMBC, pseudonym), examining how lived experiences and Christian faith intersect to shape the elders' understanding and practice of leadership. Through thematic analysis of qualitative interviews, alongside church publications, constitutional documents, and archival materials, this chapter unveils the images, practices, and underlying assumptions of two generations of elders. Three key themes illuminate this landscape: the church as “Home,” the leadership as “Soldiers of Christ,” and the overarching influence of “Biblical Faith.” “Home” and “Soldiers of Christ” articulate experiences of church and leadership, respectively, while “Biblical Faith” provides the source and underlying framework shaping these images.

This chapter begins with the examination of the “home” as a foundational image, (section 3.1) cultivated by the first-generation elders to address the needs of the Mandarin-speaking community in Hong Kong. While initially unifying, this image encounters challenges arising from external pressures and generational shifts, including the challenges of displacement and the search for a new physical space, revealing inherent tensions within the concept of “Home” itself and the elders' own sense of belonging within it. The following section (3.2) analyzes GMBC's espoused “collective leadership model,” uncovering the subtle influence of the “Soldiers of Christ” image. This metaphor reveals unspoken power dynamics, including the role of informal leadership and the challenges of maintaining collective leadership across generations, and generational differences in understanding leadership roles and responsibilities. The section highlights the challenges of this militaristic image, particularly as the second generation seeks a more collaborative approach. Finally, section 3.3 investigates the role of “Biblical Faith,” exploring its dynamic interplay with the lived experiences of the elders. This section analyzes how the Bible functions as both a symbol of authority, providing a foundation for beliefs and practices, and a source of theological imagery, informing the metaphors used to understand church and leadership. This exploration reveals how the elders engage

with Scripture to make sense of their roles, respond to challenges, and interact with the congregation, as well as the tensions between idealized biblical principles and the complexities of lived experience, including the influence of personal authority and a limited attempt to introduce formal theology.

3.1 “Home”: The Search for Stability and Belonging in a Shifting Landscape

The image of “Home” is essential to understanding the complex relationship between leadership and the image of the Church at GMBC. Exploration of this theme provides a foundational lens through which the subsequent analysis of leadership styles, values, and generational shifts can be better understood. By first establishing this grounding image of the Church, the chapter illuminates how this image shapes and is shaped by leadership within the specific socio-cultural context of GMBC.

This exploration of the “Home” unfolds by first examining how this image was actively espoused by GMBC's founding leaders and subsequently embraced by the congregation. The analysis then delves into the specific practices and experiences, particularly those related to language, family, and leadership, that contributed to the construction of this image in the early years of GMBC. Finally, the chapter investigates how this image was challenged and reshaped by a series of crises and the emergence of a new generation of leaders, revealing the dynamic interplay between theological imagery, leadership practices, and evolving communal needs.

3.1.1 The Espoused “Home”: Founding the Identity of GMBC

“Welcome Home”: A New Community in the Making

Concurrently with establishing the church, GMBC's founding elders cultivated the image of the church as a home for Mandarin-speaking “Hong Kong drifters”. This image is evident in GMBC's “About Us” section, a narrative dating back to the church's founding:

We are a group of primarily Mandarin-speaking believers who are not affiliated with any denomination. We believe that the entire Bible, both Old and New Testaments, is inspired by God, clarifying the nature and salvation of Jesus Christ. The Bible is also the supreme standard for our faith and life. If you are still looking for a spiritual home, we warmly welcome you to join us in worshipping God and serving one another.¹⁵⁰

This appears to be the earliest known text where “Home” is used to articulate the church's identity.

Notably, this usage is also closely linked to the Mandarin language. Such emphasis is significant when considering the sociolinguistic context of GMBC's establishment in the late 1990s and early 2000s, a period marked by a burgeoning Mandarin-speaking population in Hong Kong. According to elders Vasilios* and Elias**'s narratives on the establishment of the church, the Sino-British Joint Declaration (1983) and the Tiananmen Square incident (1989) led to emigration of Hong Kong professionals and an influx of Mandarin-speaking individuals seeking opportunities. China's development at that time created many business opportunities, and numerous companies from Taiwan, North America, Europe, and elsewhere sent managers and professionals to work in Hong Kong. At the same time, the Hong Kong government was also engaged in numerous public construction projects, including a new university, which created many job opportunities for professionals. Adding to this growing Mandarin-speaking population were mainland Chinese students seeking higher education and future prospects, drawn by the opening of student visas by Hong Kong universities.¹⁵¹ The phrase “If you are still searching for

¹⁵⁰ The Chinese version is “我們是一群以普通話為主的信徒，我們並不隸屬於任何宗派。我們相信全本新舊約聖經都是神所默示的，闡明耶穌基督的位格及救恩。聖經也是我們信仰及生活的最高準則。如果您仍在尋找屬靈的家，我們非常歡迎您加入我們，一同敬拜神，彼此服事。” (On GMBC website, last accessed: May 26, 2023). The earliest available version of this account, dating back to the *10th Anniversary Special Issue* published in 2005, appears to be the earliest recorded instance of this introduction. The concluding statement, asserting that “the Bible is the supreme standard for our faith and life,” appears to be a resolute declaration of belief and practice. Notably, an earlier iteration of the introduction, available in both Chinese and English, contained an additional sentence absent in the current version: “We hope through this church we can serve God's people, provide ministry opportunities, learn how to live a godly life in this busy environment, and preach the Gospel effectively to all who are willing to hear.”

¹⁵¹ Vasilios*, “Ten Years Planting a Tree” in “*Vision and Grace*” - *10th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2005). Supported by Elias*, “The History of GMBC”, Sunday School PPT on Aug 26th, 2018.

a spiritual home” held particular resonance for those Mandarin-speaking “Hong Kong drifters” who, while unfamiliar with and intrigued by religion, also longed for a sense of community and belonging.

Founding Narratives: Weaving an Image of Belonging and Stability

This image of “home” is actively woven into the very fabric of GMBC's identity through the narratives repeatedly recounted by its leaders in sermons and church publications. For instance, in a publication from 2005 marking the tenth anniversary of GMBC, Vasilios*, a founding elder, recounts the context of GMBC's founding, highlighting the challenges faced by Mandarin-speaking individuals in Hong Kong at the time:

GMBC was established in 1995 by eight families. At that time, due to the impending handover of Hong Kong to China, there was a brain drain as many institutions and universities actively recruited talent from overseas. Universities also began to invite students from Mainland China to study in Hong Kong. Most of these incoming professionals and students did not speak Cantonese. A few professors from the University of S and T initially set up a student fellowship on campus, meeting every Friday in Mandarin... Soon, several Mandarin-speaking families in the Hong Kong Island area also started a monthly gathering to support each other. ... At that time, the leaders of these fellowships attended Sunday services at English or Cantonese-speaking churches. Later, some friends who attended these services decided to accept Jesus, which raised a problem: who could baptize them? Their English and Cantonese were not good, so which church should they join? Would they have opportunities for service and growth there? After a period of prayer and consultation with some spiritual seniors, we decided to establish our own church, a spiritual home for Mandarin-speaking believers, through which the Christians could be nurtured, learn to serve, and lead a devout life in this busy environment, and effectively spread the gospel to those who have not yet believed.¹⁵²

The series of questions Vasilios* posed reveal the profound sense of exclusion experienced by this community, emphasizing the need for a dedicated space where the newcomers of the faith could fully participate in Christian life. Elias*, another founder, echoes this sentiment,

(Our church) has been raised up by God in an extraordinary time and place to serve an extraordinary group of people. May we unite in honoring the Lord as supreme, being faithful to His calling, giving our all, working together with the

¹⁵² Vasilios* (interview), “Ten Years Planting a Tree” in *“Vision and Grace” - 10th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2005):60.

Holy Spirit, saving souls, building the church, and glorifying the name of the Lord. We wanted to provide necessities, share experiences, teach, and fellowship with those 'drifters,' offering a sense of home and spiritual renewal. Our hope was for them to continue their journey with the Lord as companions, not lonely sojourners.¹⁵³

Notably, Elias* described GMBC as a divinely appointed haven for “lonely sojourners,” offering them “a sense of home and spiritual renewal” whereas Elias* also emphasized the conditions for realizing this vision: unwavering faithfulness to God's calling, complete dedication, collaboration with the Holy Spirit, and selfless church building.

This deliberate construction of the “Home” image transforms it from a comforting image into a foundational element of GMBC's existence. However, what makes these accounts so powerful is that they come directly from the leaders themselves. They are not merely retelling historical facts; they are actively shaping the church's identity by their diligent service, which is accepted by the congregation.

Echoes of the “Home”: Congregational Acceptance and Transmission

Supporting materials indicate the acceptance of the leaders' voices within the GMBC congregation. The image of “spiritual home,” mentioned in congregational testimonies over the years, suggests its internalization within the community.¹⁵⁴ Furthermore, the *20th Anniversary Special Issue* of GMBC's publication in 2015 offers historical insight. Its foreword introduces the development of GMBC as follows:

Over two decades ago, God called ten Christian families from North America to Hong Kong. Some came to teach at various universities, while others were executives on international enterprises. Many of them, raised in Taiwan, had studied or worked at North American universities and corporations, with Mandarin as their native language. Their children, mostly born in North America, primarily spoke English. In 1995, moved by the Holy Spirit, ten such families came together to establish the Hong Kong Bible Church and initiated Bible study groups on various campuses. In 1998, several universities in Hong Kong began recruiting undergraduate students from mainland China, offering full scholarships. Consequently, each year, a new cohort of students arrived in Hong Kong, most of whom had never heard the Gospel. However,

¹⁵³ Elias*, “Passing the Torch” in *“Vision and Grace” - 10th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2005):4.

¹⁵⁴ “Testimonies from Six Families” in *“Vision and Grace” - 10th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2005).

during their studies, they encountered the Gospel, came to know the Lord, and grew in their faith through a church that primarily used Mandarin—their mother tongue. Mandarin fellowships continued to grow on many campuses in Hong Kong. Over the past two decades, God has also brought many executives and their families to Hong Kong, joining the ranks of those serving at the Hong Kong Bible Church. Their exemplary testimonies and accomplishments in the workplace have become a source of inspiration and encouragement for many young people who have chosen to remain in Hong Kong after graduation.¹⁵⁵

This text, notably written by an editor rather than an elder, presents intriguing nuances. The discrepancy between the initial reference to “eight families” in earlier Vasilios* materials and the “ten families” mentioned here highlights the feature of ingrained storytelling within the narrative's acceptance and transmission in the community. While this text does not explicitly mention “Home” as an overarching image, it utilizes “family” as a unit when referring to the founders. Moreover, employing “God” as the subject in phrases like “God called” and “God brought” infuses GMBC's narrative with a faith-based, almost legendary quality. The founders, described as North American immigrants with a shared Mandarin language, are further characterized as university professors and corporate executives. Emphasizing their “exemplary testimonies and accomplishments in the workplace” positions them as both respected social elites and heroes of faith. This suggests that, in embracing the collective identity of GMBC, the congregation also views its leaders as embodiments of the group's image and mission.

3.1.2 Constructing “Home”: Language, Family, Place and Leadership

Having established how GMBC's leaders explicitly espouse the “Home” image, this section discusses how specific practices and experiences construct this image. Reflected from the data, this image hinges on four interconnected aspects: language, family, place, and leadership.

Language as a uniting force

The Mandarin language becomes a cornerstone of GMBC's identity while initially a potential barrier for Mandarin speakers in a Cantonese-dominant Hong Kong.

¹⁵⁵ Foreword, in “Use Me for Two Decades” (用我二十年) - *20th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2016).

Though Chinese Mandarin is the official language of mainland China and widely spoken elsewhere, Cantonese remained dominant in Hong Kong, creating a linguistic barrier for Mandarin speakers. Although the presence of Mandarin and Mandarin-speaking churches in Hong Kong has grown in recent decades, they were less common during the period of GMBC's founding. Many Mandarin speakers arrived in Hong Kong unaware of the communication barrier posed by Cantonese, thus the shock of linguistic difference positioned local Cantonese culture as an “other,” enhancing the feelings of alienation and marginalization. Even within the local churches, the language barrier hindered full engagement for non-Cantonese speakers, making it challenging to embrace local Christian life.

Upon arriving in Hong Kong, these elders personally experienced the challenges posed by the language barrier. This was particularly pronounced for Vasilios* who aimed to evangelize on campuses, encountering significant setbacks.¹⁵⁶ However, they soon discovered that this sense of marginalization fostered connections among Mandarin-speaking Christians and families from diverse backgrounds, leading to the formation of small groups. Even established groups like the one initiated independently by Marios*, were drawn to this burgeoning community.¹⁵⁷ In this context, the founders' experiences with Chinese churches in North America—Mandarin-speaking Christian communities existing within a different linguistic and cultural context—proved more relevant than those of local churches in Hong Kong. This situation fostered a unique sense of mission: The Mandarin language, initially marginalizing in Hong Kong, became, in the eyes of the founders, an instrument for solidifying the community and evangelizing the Mandarin-speaking groups.

Despite actively leveraging the potential of “Mandarin”, the church leaders demonstrated a keen awareness of the sensitivity of language. This is evident in the deliberate choice of the church's name. While “Mandarin” features prominently in the English name, it is notably absent from its more commonly used Chinese name. This omission stems from a strategic decision made during the church's founding.

Vasilios* recounts the discussion, stating:

¹⁵⁶ Vasilios*, “Go to All the World” Sermon Apr 2011, published in *Annual Publication 2009-2011*.

¹⁵⁷ Interview-Marios*-20240312.

At that time, we were brainstorming names for the church, thinking about advertising and outreach. The word “Mandarin” worked well in English, for it has that historical significance, reminiscent of the Qing dynasty. But translating it into Chinese? Using “Putonghua”(普通話) seemed too close to Mainland China. “Guoyu”(國語) would seem too close to Taiwan. And “Huayu”(華語) is too close to Singapore. None of these felt quite right, so we decided not to mention it at all in its Chinese name, and well, that settled it.¹⁵⁸

This careful consideration of terminology highlights the founders' sensitivity to the diverse backgrounds within different Chinese communities. It also illustrates their desire to utilize Mandarin as a tool for outreach and community building rather than a marker of exclusion. This pragmatic approach is further evidenced by the church's willingness to adapt its language practices as needed. For instance, to accommodate an American youth pastor from 2004 to 2015, GMBC's co-workers conducted meetings and recorded minutes in English for a period of time.¹⁵⁹ This demonstrates a flexible and inclusive approach to language, utilizing Mandarin as a strategic asset rather than an identifier of the community.

Family as Embodiment of “Home”

The concepts of “home” (家) and “family” (家庭), both represented by the Chinese character “家,” are closely intertwined linguistically and emotionally. The diligent efforts of GMBC leaders and their families transformed the abstract notion of “Home” into a tangible reality. As a student in a campus Bible study group wrote in an article:

Elder Elias* and his wife are parents within our community. Their profound love for students manifests in countless ways. They dedicate their free time to engaging with those seeking faith, patiently answering questions and guiding them towards God. Their home has long been open to hosting fellowship gatherings and meals, where they diligently lead students in pre-study and scripture analysis. Their unwavering devotion to serving God has been evident since their arrival in Hong Kong over two decades ago. This humble and endearing couple holds a special place in our hearts. Elias* embodies the

¹⁵⁸ Vasilios*, “Go to All the World” Sermon Apr 2011, published in *Annual Publication 2009-2011*.

¹⁵⁹ Meeting minutes from May 2004 to May 2015 are in English, coinciding with the youth pastor's tenure. Conversely, minutes prior to 2004 (though incomplete) and those following May 2015 are recorded in Chinese. Furthermore, my personal observation as a ministry assistant during 2012-13 confirmed the efficacy of these meetings: despite varying levels of fluency, all participants could engage in English discussions without the need for translation.

virtues of a true gentleman, while his wife compliments him as a lively and supportive partner. They consistently prioritize our meetings arriving early and waiting patiently. Through academic and personal challenges, they offer unwavering support and empathy, much like loving parents. While Elias*'s character and professional achievements inspire admiration, he remains remarkably humble, attributing all successes to God's grace. Both he and his wife emphasize that their life's guiding principle is to prioritize God in all endeavors. Although they express gratitude for the students' enthusiasm and spiritual growth, it is their unwavering love and dedication over the years that has truly nurtured our fellowship.¹⁶⁰

This description reflects a common perception among young students at the time regarding church elders and their families. The husband and wife embody clearly defined roles, exhibiting integrity, love, and unwavering support. They represent a model family rooted in faith, offering guidance and a source of strength for younger generations. Referring to Elias* and his wife as “parents” underscores this sentiment, highlighting the profound respect and familial connection fostered within the group. This familial dynamic was indeed prevalent during that period.

Within GMBC, the sense of belonging associated with “home” stemmed directly from the “families” of the church leaders. Students attending campus Bible study groups were often welcomed into their professors' homes for meals. These gatherings provided not only home-cooked food but also a space for sharing experiences and engaging in discussions about faith. Additionally, the tradition of elders inviting students unable to return home for the Spring Festival to celebrate with them fostered a sense of family during this significant holiday.¹⁶¹ For families of professionals working in Hong Kong, the church also provided a space to connect with others who shared similar linguistic and cultural backgrounds. These connections offered valuable support and fellowship, particularly regarding navigating workplace culture, marital relationships, and raising children in Hong Kong.

This close association of familial values with faith, often observed in North American

¹⁶⁰ “I Want to Chat with You: These Beautiful People, These Beautiful Things.” in *Annual Publication 2016-17*.

¹⁶¹ Referenced by numerous testimonies in the annual publications. Actually, I was one of the students who attended the home gathering held by the elders.

Chinese churches, is clearly evidenced within GMBC reflected by the example as the aforementioned preface. It can be argued that the model of the leaders' families—successful husbands, capable homemakers as wives, and obedient and accomplished children—embodied the image of the church as a “home.” This powerful image of home and family—one where the public-facing leadership of the husband was implicitly supported by the domestic and pastoral labor of the wife—profoundly shaped early students' perceptions of Christianity at GMBC.

Place for Stability

The data also reveals the paramount importance of physical place or space (i.e., the gathering place) to the church's identity as a “home,” particularly for a congregation of “Hong Kong drifters”.

In the bustling, densely populated, and space-scarce urban environment of Hong Kong, this sense of stability associated with place takes on heightened significance. Prior to the establishment of GMBC, leaders' Bible study groups convened in homes or classrooms on campus. After the church's founding, to accommodate a diverse congregation, Sunday services were held in rented spaces. Due to the exorbitant cost of renting venues in Hong Kong, the initial approach was hourly rental arrangements. However, it proved inconvenient, necessitating prompt departures and instrument transportation. In May 2023, the church secured a monthly rental space in a Hong Kong Island office building. In an interview in 2005, Vasilios* recalls this transition as highly beneficial, stating,

Switching from hourly to monthly rentals allowed us to linger after gatherings for as long as we wished. Since then, we have enjoyed Sunday lunches together, fostering a sense of 'home'.¹⁶²

As Vasilios* described, despite rapidly growing to 250 attendees at adult gatherings, the church initially operated without any paid staff, relying entirely on volunteers to manage all aspects of its operations. Remarkably, over 70 individuals were baptized within the first year. However, in April 2004, citing the economic downturn caused by

¹⁶² Vasilios* (interview), “Ten Years Planting a Tree (十年樹木)” in “*Vision and Grace*” - 10th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC (2005).

the 2003 SARS outbreak, the building owners of that unit abruptly informed GMBC of their intention to sell the apartment. They inquired about GMBC's interest in purchasing the unit. GMBC's leaders were hesitant, having relocated less than a year prior and expending a significant portion of their building fund on renovations. However, they recognized the potential need for another relocation should the owner declare bankruptcy or sell the property. In a published interview of Vasilios* in 2005, he recalled,

We convened a special elders' meeting, engaging in fervent prayer and meticulous analysis. Finally, the leadership unanimously resolved to purchase the property. In May, we presented our vision to the congregation: 'Growth in Stability.' A call for pledges was issued, and a building purchase committee was formed to negotiate with the owners and explore financing options with banks. Despite encountering some challenges, we were deeply grateful to God when, by the end of June, we had surpassed our fundraising goal... Throughout this process, we were moved by numerous testimonies: several members generously donated a month's salary; some cancelled family vacations, contributing the saved funds; and others donated their entire bonuses.¹⁶³

The word “stability” in the leaders' articulation of their vision aptly captured the profound significance of place for this community, a sentiment that clearly resonated with the congregation. The successful acquisition of this dedicated space for worship and gathering marked a high point for both GMBC and its leadership. As the 2005 interview article concluded,

It is our hope that this article will provide greater understanding of how our *spiritual home* was established amidst unstable circumstances, how it serves as a base for gospel proclamation, and how it equips believers to become effective workers for God.¹⁶⁴

It is important to note that Vasilios*'s reference to “encountering some challenges” merely glosses over a significant episode. In an interview conducted for this study, Marios*, the elder who headed the “building purchase committee,” revealed that the

¹⁶³ Vasilios* (interview), “Ten Years Planting a Tree (十年樹木)” in “*Vision and Grace*” - 10th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC (2005). Supported by Elias*, “Say Goodbye to Comfort Zone (告別安逸)”, in “Use Me for Two Decades” - 20th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC (2016).

¹⁶⁴ Vasilios* (interview), “Ten Years Planting a Tree” in “*Vision and Grace*” - 10th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC (2005).

process was an excruciating experience for him. He mentioned, during the price negotiations, another elder (unnamed by Marios*) insisted on aggressively pushing for a lower price, much to the displeasure of the owners who felt the offer was far too low. This situation caused Marios* considerable distress. He emphasized to me that he had “never shared this with anyone else.”¹⁶⁵ This unspoken torment, hidden behind GMBC's narrative of triumph, has lingered in the leadership team since 2004, planting seeds of discontent that would resurface during another place-related crisis and conflict in 2013, which will be discussed in later sections.

Leadership as Backbone

The image of “Home” is not merely a shared sentiment. It is strategically built and maintained by leadership that acted as its backbone in the early days of GMBC. These founding leaders were not only the storytellers who weave the “Home” into GMBC's identity, the practitioners of caring, but also the architects who ensured its continued strength and relevance.

This is evident in several key practices. First, they demonstrated a keen understanding of branding, intentionally incorporating the “Home” image into the names of their flagship evangelistic events, like the “Home of Mandarin Scholars” and “Home of Mandarin Students.” This directly targeted the longing for belonging that many Mandarin-speaking staff members and students in the universities.¹⁶⁶

Second, the first generation leaders leveraged their personal networks, particularly those cultivated in North American Chinese churches, to bring in speakers and resources tailored to the specific needs of their community.¹⁶⁷ These renowned North American Chinese Christian speakers held greater appeal for the newly arrived mainland audience than local Hong Kong speakers.

Third, recognizing the paramount importance of a physical gathering place, the

¹⁶⁵ Interview-Marios*-20240312.

¹⁶⁶ “Events” in *10th, 20th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2005, 2016); Elias*, “The History of GMBC”, Sunday School Lecture on Aug 26th, 2018. The topics include “Faith and Reason,” “The Reliability of the Resurrection,” and “Is the Evolution Valid?”

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

leadership made significant sacrifices to secure a permanent location for GMBC. As described earlier, the decision to purchase their own building, despite financial risks and internal disagreements, underscored their commitment to providing a stable and consistent “Home” for the congregation. This tangible manifestation of the “Home” metaphor likely resonated deeply with the community, particularly those who identified as “Hong Kong drifters.”

Finally, the leadership had shown a remarkable ability to adapt to the evolving needs of the community. As the demographics shifted from primarily students to include young professionals and families, they responded by organizing career workshops, premarital counselling sessions, and parenting discussions, always emphasizing the importance of family – a core value resonating with the “Home” image.¹⁶⁸

By strategically converging resources, experience, and a deep understanding of their target audience at the “Home,” the leaders ensured its continued relevance and appeal. They were not only embodying the values of home but also actively constructing and reinforcing its structure, ensuring it remains a vibrant and supportive space for Mandarin-speaking Christians in Hong Kong.

Thus emerges a portrait of the “Home” considering the aspects above: GMBC is created to be a “Home” for Mandarin-Speaking Hong Kong drifters. This sense of belonging is intentionally cultivated through shared language, the embrace of family values, and a leadership demonstrably dedicated to meeting the community's evolving needs – both spiritual and practical. The acquisition of a permanent physical space further solidifies this “Home,” providing not just a place for worship, but a tangible anchor of stability and belonging in a transient urban environment. By strategically weaving together these elements, GMBC's leaders have created a space where Mandarin speakers find solace, connection, and a profound sense of belonging, offering a powerful counter-narrative to the prevalent “drifter” experience.

3.1.3 “Home” Disrupted: Displacement, Crisis and Shifting Images

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. These activities include recurring “dating and relationships” seminars and premarital counselling, alongside topics such as “Biblical Child-Rearing.”

While the 'Home' image provided a sense of stability for GMBC, a forced relocation from church property challenged this image and led to a search for new ways of understanding their identity.

A Home Displaced

In early 2013, a corporation initiated legal action to force GMBC to sell its premises.¹⁶⁹ Facing significant pressure, the church leadership ultimately decided to sell and seek an alternative location. This decision aimed to minimize disruption to services and preserve congregational stability. This decision was announced by Elias* in a Sunday sermon delivered on December 29, 2013, and later published in the church's 2013-2014 annual publication.

In his sermon, Elias* recounted GMBC's journey from hourly rentals to monthly leases, culminating in the purchase of their own space. This acquisition, he again emphasized, alleviated the feeling of being “under the roof of others” and fostered stronger community relationships, ultimately leading to significant growth in attendance. As Elias* emotionally recalled:

That year's miracle was also related to SARS, as the GMBC was able to purchase the property at a historically low price. We dedicated this “home,” this office building, to our Heavenly Father. At that time, the church truly bid farewell to the transient life ‘under the roof of others’ and entered a period of comfort.”¹⁷⁰

Subsequently, Elias* used the metaphor of “living under another's roof” to describe the church's current situation:

The church ultimately decided that we would say goodbye to our home and start a new life “under the roof of others”. During this time, it was uncertain whether God had other important guidance for the church, even many brothers and sisters perhaps could not fully understand what it meant to “under the roof of others”.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Elias*, “Say Goodbye to Comfort Zone”, in “Use Me for Two Decades” - *20th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2016).

¹⁷⁰ Ibid.

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

Elias*'s sermon poignantly conveys his deep regret over the loss of the church's property. The image of "home" appeared again in his words, but this time is a mournful "leaving home". His repeated use of the phrase "under the roof of others" further emphasizes the impact of this displacement. While GMBC leaders initially sought to create a stable home for Hong Kong drifters, this loss cast the entire congregation into a state of drifting.

"Military Camp": A Struggling New Image

However, despite the lamentation, Elias* strives to reframe the upheaval positively, encouraging the congregation to embrace the uncertainty:

While beginning anew 'under the roof of others' will undoubtedly evoke sadness, aligning ourselves with God's will, even if it means relinquishing comfort and embracing uncertainty, might be the greatest gift we offer Jesus in 2013. Perhaps this departure from comfort, this return to our initial love and passion for souls, is precisely what God desires for GMBC in 2014.¹⁷²

Elias*'s reference to "initial passion for souls" underscores the church's core mission of Evangelism. Drawing upon Hebrews 11:8, he reminds the congregation of Abraham's unwavering faith: "By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to the place which he would receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going."¹⁷³ Through this powerful example, Elias* encourages his congregation to view their displacement as an opportunity for renewed Evangelistic zeal. He exhorts them to "leave their comfort zones and expand God's tent," likening their mission to the conquest of the Promised Land, a testament to faith and a means of inheriting God's property. In retrospect, rather than a "home for drifters," "military camps" or "barracks of soldiers" seem to better capture Elias*'s envisioned image of the church: an entity not meant to take roots in the land but to outreach and win souls for God.

Elias*'s reinterpretation, a form of theological construction and leadership practice,

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

aims to foster unity and bolster the congregation's faith especially in such a critical moment. However, his reconstruction appears questionable. While the “military camp” image encourages purposeful action and a willingness to sacrifice comfort for God, it lacks the earlier emphasis on stability and belonging. Although evangelism and soul-winning have always been central to GMBC leaders, this new image, with its intensified focus on these aspects, inadvertently diminishes the sense of caring and belonging that once characterized the church. Consequently, this rebranding may not resonate with the congregation or even other leaders – a concern corroborated by the subsequent experiences of GMBC's leadership, which highlight the shortcomings of this new image.

Blurred Image and Uncertain Future

During this tumultuous period, Elias*'s articulation of “loss of Home” and the “military camp” image temporarily resonated with other leaders, but this resonance proved ephemeral. Nasos*, a prominent second-generation leader, expressed his support for Elias*'s militaristic image in a 2016 article outlining his hopes for GMBC's future:

We do not know what GMBC will become, but our dream is for our church to be one ablaze with the fire of prayer. It will be an “aggressive” church—one that Satan both hates and fears, a church where brothers and sisters are full of life, energy, direction, and purpose. We will reach outwards, striving to win lost souls for the Lord. It will be a church of grace—where brothers and sisters do not rely on their own performance, but on the power of the Gospel to live and serve. Just thinking about growing and serving with such a group of loving, committed, and wonderful brothers and sisters is truly exciting. May God continue to bless GMBC and use us even more to fulfil His Great Commission! ¹⁷⁴

In Nasos*'s vision, terms like “aggressive,” “striving to win lost souls,” and “Satan both hates and fears,” depict the church as a militant force. However, such expressions would become increasingly blurred amidst internal tensions and conflicts within the leadership team in the following years.

The search for a new location after the sale of their property, while paramount, exposed a fundamental disagreement among the elders regarding the church's

¹⁷⁴ Nasos*, “GMBC and Our Family”, in *20th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2016).

future development. At that time, Vasilios* had retired from his university position and returned to the United States from Hong Kong. Elias* advocated for a “multi-site model,” dividing the congregation across several locations. This approach, he argued, would provide more ministry opportunities to train workers while facilitating outreach to Mandarin speakers in various regions, aligning with his vision of “expanding military camps.” Conversely, some elders favored a single, larger space to accommodate the entire congregation, believing it would allow for concentrated resources and deeper pastoral care. Ultimately, GMBC opted for the “multi-site model,” establishing three separate locations in Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories, and starting to appoint several younger members to leadership positions.¹⁷⁵

However, to Elias*'s disappointment, GMBC did not experience rapid expansion. Instead, amidst the social movement and the subsequent pandemic, its growth stagnated. Elias* also expressed a sense of disappointment with the current leadership, believing the focus of ministry had shifted too heavily towards community life. He perceived this direction as a departure from the church's original mission of reaching mainland China.¹⁷⁶

However, the second-generation leadership did not coalesce around a singular, clearly articulated vision comparable to either the “Home” or the “Military camp” images. Only Nasos* indirectly referenced a compelling image of the situation of

¹⁷⁵ The process was contentious, straining relationships between elders and other team members. While a formal consensus was eventually reached, one elder subsequently took a leave of absence until their term ended and ultimately resigned from the board. Although many witnessed these conflicts, they remain largely unspoken in official church publications or sermons, referred to only obliquely as “part of history,” as Nasos* noted. During interviews, each participant (except Vasilios*, who had relocated), alluded to this period, often indirectly as “you know that incident,” acknowledging my presence during that time. As a researcher, I had to make a decision on how deeply to probe into the details of these events during interviews and data compilation. The primary consideration was ethical; after clearly sensing their emotional responses, I needed to balance the psychological impact of further detailed inquiries against the initial intent of the research. Moreover, the conflicts within the church involved more people than just these elders, thus I opted not to focus extensively on objectively reconstructing or reviewing those events, but rather on focusing on the interview data, specifically the subjective expressions of the interviewees.

¹⁷⁶ Interview-Elias*-20221108. Despite expressing a desire to “let go” regarding the selection of the next generation of leaders, his dissatisfaction was palpable.

GMBC in the interviews. Reflecting on the period of transition, he stated:

As the elders gradually retired and departed, I found myself in an inescapable role. Abandoning the ship halfway was not a consideration, as I would still be part of the community. While my specific service role remained an open question, remaining within the church was the only option.¹⁷⁷

While Nasos*'s statement conveys his steadfast commitment as a leader amidst pressure, it lacks the progressive spirit and enthusiasm observed in 2015.

Particularly striking is the phrase “abandoning the ship halfway” – though Nasos* emphasizes this was not a personal option, it suggests a telling image of GMBC: no longer a purposeful, driven entity akin to a military unit, but rather a ship adrift in uncharted waters. This image poignantly reflects the reality of GMBC's second-generation leadership in the wake of the church's turmoil.

3.1.4 Leaders and the “Home”: Tensions in-Between

To fully grasp the elders' leadership philosophies, we must examine the interplay between their self-perceptions and the images they use to describe the church community. The exploration of this intersection uncovers not only how they view the church but also their perceived place within it, revealing the beliefs, motivations, and limitations that shape their leadership practices. This section, therefore, discusses the tensions, or even potential dissonance, between the perceived image of “Home” and the lived experiences of the elders, highlighting the complexities of belonging and the ongoing negotiation of identity within this community.

During my interview with Elias*, I asked him, “What kind of image do you think you have among the congregation at GMBC?” He seemed slightly taken aback by the question, not in a resistant way, but as if he had not considered it before. After a pause for reflection, he replied:

Well, I am not so sure about that, not so sure... Different people might only see certain parts of us, you know? It's quite interesting, when God moved us away (referring to retirement back to the US in 2018), we were still healthy. So, in their impression, we were not taken care of as “senior adults” by the church members. In this place, we are... not like fathers, right? We are more like teachers. Also, we might have some talent in management. So, we might

¹⁷⁷ Interview-Nasos*-20221105.

be seen as managers with strong governance and problem-solving skills. Therefore, I think our brothers and sisters are more comfortable seeing us as givers, who they can approach for solutions to their faith or family problems. Besides, the challenges and responsibilities of the church also fall on us. Of course, if I had stayed at GMBC for another 10 years, everyone would have seen, wow, how this elder deals with so many difficulties in life, often needing help from brothers and sisters. But our church is very transient, it won't let us wait until we become "stubborn old people" and become a burden to others, out of touch with the times. We haven't become that "paternalistic"... or rather, they haven't seen that side of us, we are already gone. What else? Of course, you should ask the brothers and sisters. Haha, how do they see us? ¹⁷⁸

Elias*'s emphasis on what he is "not" before revealing his actual characteristics reveals a resistance to certain perceptions, specifically, the image of a "parent." This is particularly striking given the prevalence of familial metaphors within Chinese Christianity, where senior members are often regarded as spiritual parents.¹⁷⁹ This is demonstrably true within GMBC itself, where Elias* and his wife are explicitly described as "parents of a spiritual family" in a testimonial. However, Elias* actively distances himself from the "father" figure and traditional Chinese "patriarchal" image, employing negative terms like "old," "stubborn," "a burden," and "not keeping up." This suggests a conscious rejection of the familial structure and paternalistic leadership common in Chinese churches. While this resistance may stem from anxieties about his age and ability to contribute, the explicit rejection of paternalism points to a deeper critique of prevailing cultural norms within Chinese Christian communities.

Vasilios* retired from GMBC and returned to the United States in 2013. By the time of my interview, he had already re-established himself as a key leader within a local Chinese church, frequently referencing his experiences from this new church. After his departure, Vasilios* maintained a posture of non-interference in any affairs of GMBC, even during internal conflicts among the church leadership. It further piqued

¹⁷⁸ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

¹⁷⁹ See Yang Fenggang, *Chinese Christians in America: Conversion, Assimilation, and Adhesive Identities* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press), 1999 and Su Wenfeng (蘇文峰), *A Transpacific River of Faith: Reflections and Prospects for Chinese Bible Study Groups in America*. 大洋彼岸的長河—美國華人查經班回顧與展望 Torrance: OCM, 2015. Nanlai Cao, "The Church as a Surrogate Family for Working Class Immigrant Chinese Youth: An Ethnography of Segmented Assimilation," *Sociology of Religion* 66, no. 2 (Summer, 2005):183-200.

my curiosity regarding his perception of his own image within church settings, both past (GMBC) and present. He stated:

You see, it's like this. Now that I've decided to join this church, it's my home. And if it's my home, naturally, I want to make it better, right? It's just like... Let me ask you this: do you own your house or rent? You rent? See, that's the difference! When you rent, you don't really care about the decorations and all that, because you're not putting down roots. But when you buy a place, you want to make it your own, make it a suitable place to live. This church, this SD church, it's like I bought it. I'm here to stay. Unless they kick me out, this is my home now. So, my wife and I, we're thinking about how to take care of this place, you know, how to really make it something special.¹⁸⁰

While distinct in style, Vasilios*'s response shares noteworthy parallels with Elias*'s. His use of the “own home” metaphor, evoking a strong sense of belonging and ownership, to depict his current church is significant. However, he emphasizes the experience of inhabiting this space rather than his contributions to its construction. This aligns with Elias*'s self-description as a “manager,” “giver,” or “teacher.” Notably, Vasilios* omits any mention of his perspective on GMBC, whether viewing it as a former dwelling now relinquished.

Both Vasilios* and Elias* present an interesting tension: while perceiving the church as “home/family,” their contributions to this community are marked by a sense of detachment, not viewing themselves as integral family members deeply enmeshed in the lives of other church members. While they dedicate themselves to serving the congregation, they seem to maintain a certain distance, even expressing resistance to deeper relational entanglement.

This tension is particularly evident in Elias*'s perspective. He emphasizes the importance of family within the church, yet his narratives reveal a limited focus on community building and local engagement. This seeming dissonance might stem from a complex interplay of factors. While his professional life provided a comfortable existence in Hong Kong without requiring deep integration into local society, his theological understanding of the church's mission, primarily focused on evangelism and outreach to mainland China, likely also played a significant role. Furthermore,

¹⁸⁰ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128.

his personal experiences and preferences might also contribute to this perspective. This sense of detachment from the local community, coupled with their dedication to the church's mission, aligns with the “military image” that emerges from the first generation's narratives. They see themselves as soldiers fighting for a cause, establishing a “Home” for the “drifters” but not necessarily seeking deep integration into the surrounding society. Their primary focus lies in fulfilling their mission, and as they perceive their strength waning, they seem prepared to fade out from the community, leaving the “battlefield” to the next generation.

In contrast, the second-generation elders, as exemplified by Nasos*, hold a distinctly different self-perception. His assertion that he cannot “abandon the ship halfway” is particularly revealing, as he emphasizes this is not solely due to his leadership position but because he considers himself “part of the community.” He further stresses that regardless of any specific service role, “remaining within the church was the only option.” This clearly demonstrates that Nasos*'s sense of belonging to the community supersedes his commitment to any particular responsibility or mission. In other words, Nasos* views being an integral part of the community as the very foundation for his leadership within it, or, to express it metaphorically: navigating together with all crew members in the same boat, searching for direction.

This exploration of the first and second-generation leaders' self-perception reveals a complex interplay between individual backgrounds, theological frameworks, and evolving community needs within GMBC. The elders' struggle to articulate their place within the church, particularly in relation to the “home” image, exposes a certain disconnect between their leadership roles and their sense of belonging within the community. This disconnect, further amplified by the generational differences in their lived experiences and future aspirations, highlights the critical situation for GMBC. As the church navigates the changing landscape of Hong Kong and the evolving needs of its congregation, finding new images that bridge these generational and theological divides becomes essential.

3.2 “Soldiers of Christ”: Unveiling the Dynamics of GMBC’s Collective Leadership

Unlike the “Home” metaphor, which is explicitly articulated and promoted within GMBC, the image of “Soldiers of Christ” operates as a more subtle, underlying force shaping the dynamics of collective leadership. This section reveals how this emergent image, while seemingly antithetical to the rejection of hierarchical authority in the espoused “collective leadership model” among the elders, illuminates the complexities of personal influence and power within GMBC’s leadership structure.

Before fully unveiling this “soldier” image, the analysis first establishes the context from which it emerged. The development of the collective leadership model at GMBC is traced, highlighting the founders’ deliberate rejection of the centralized “senior pastor” system and their efforts to establish a more egalitarian and power-sharing approach. However, as the analysis delves deeper into the lived experiences of both generations of elders, it becomes apparent that the “Soldiers of Christ” image, while initially effective in driving growth and unity, has also created tensions and challenges, particularly for the second generation who are seeking a more equal and collaborative approach. This exploration will reveal the unspoken power dynamics, the generational differences in understanding leadership, and the evolving relationship between mission and belonging within the church. Ultimately, the analysis examines how the second generation is beginning to articulate a new vision of collective leadership, one that embraces vulnerability, interdependence, and shared learning, potentially offering a path beyond the limitations of the “soldier” ideal.

3.2.1 Rejecting the “King”: Founding a Collective Leadership Model

This section explores the origins of GMBC’s collective leadership model, highlighting the founders’ deliberate rejection of the centralized “senior pastor” system and their efforts when establishing the characteristic “collective model” of GMBC. It indicates how their concerns about the potential for abuse and the desire to limit singular authority shaped the blueprint for leadership at GMBC. However, this analysis also reveals a crucial missing element: the unspoken source of empowerment that will shape the lived reality of leadership in the years to come.

Fear of the Senior Pastor System

Prior to establishing GMBC, Vasilios* and their Bible study group explored the possibility of joining existing churches in Hong Kong. While some churches, including a prominent Baptist church, expressed interest in developing Mandarin ministries, some core members remained hesitant. One significant concern was the prospect of being under the authority of the senior pastor. After ultimately deciding to establish their own church, Vasilios* informed the senior pastor of their decision and sought his blessing. To Vasilios*'s surprise, their dialogue was far from peaceful:

His Mandarin was poor. And my Cantonese, well, it was also poor. So, our communication was a little awkward... Anyway, I told him that we had decided to establish our own church. Register directly, you know, as a religious group under Hong Kong law. I wanted his blessing, of course. Maybe he could put in a good word for us to any Mandarin speakers he met. But... he was really displeased. "After all this time," he said, "you are just quitting." And then he just cursed at me! "Do you know how difficult it is to run a church?" he said. "You will fail miserably!"¹⁸¹

Consequently, GMBC has functioned under the leadership of this group of lay people until the present day. While employing a limited number of paid ministers and staff, the church relies primarily on lay leaders, particularly elders, for both decision-making and daily operations. This statement, delivered with a smile during the interview, hinted at a sardonic undertone directed at the aforementioned senior pastor, while also revealing Vasilios*'s satisfaction with the leadership capabilities of their lay leaders. "See, running a church is really not that difficult!" Vasilios* stated in the interview with a wry smile hinted at a sardonic undertone to that senior pastor, while also revealing Vasilios*'s satisfaction with the capabilities of their leadership as lay persons.

It is important to note that, based on interview data, the early members' objections were likely not directed at the Baptist pastor personally, but rather at the senior pastor system itself – or, more precisely, at the concept of centralized power vested in a single authority figure. However, because this system was prevalent in Chinese

¹⁸¹ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128. The words of the senior pastor were actually an idiomatic expression in Cantonese which were not as strong as Vasilios* felt.

churches, the “senior pastor” position was initially retained in GMBC's constitution, albeit remaining vacant throughout the church's history until its formal abolishment in 2012.¹⁸² Furthermore, the elders have generally refrained from explicitly voicing their opposition to the senior pastor model in public church settings. As Elias* noted in a sermon:

...For a long time, we didn't have a single full-time pastor. Despite our constant prayers and search, God didn't provide a suitable worker. However, we believe that all Christians are priests, all believers offer living sacrifices, and everyone has gifts, which is the truth we received from the Bible... When we faced a shortage of full-time pastors to shepherd the congregation, a group of lay believers saw the need for Evangelism and established the church with the willingness to be used by God.¹⁸³

While publicly attributing the absence of a senior pastor to the divine reason (“God didn't provide”), Elias* articulated his personal reservations and their rationale more directly in the interview:

Personally, I am deeply concerned about closing the door on lay leadership. I would be saddened if the church became a place where only ordained ministers preached. I believe it would hinder a great deal of ministry work, work that might otherwise be invisible. Such an arrangement, I feel, actually hinders a lot of ministry work. I have seen churches where, no matter how willing or hardworking the senior pastor is, at some point, this person will inevitably become a ‘bottleneck’ for the church.¹⁸⁴

In comparison, Marios*'s following narrative in the interview revealed that Elias*'s concerns about the senior pastor system were shared by the leadership team. However, leaving the position of senior pastor in absence was not merely a matter of

¹⁸² GMBC By-laws, versions 2009, 2012. In the 2009 version, the article on “Pastors and Ministers,” which constitutes the first part of the roles, identified three categories: (1) Senior Pastor, (2) Pastors and Senior Ministers, and (3) Ministers and other salaried staff. Regarding the Senior Pastor, the document states: “The church appoints one Senior Pastor, who is responsible for overseeing the overall ministry of the church, fulfilling the mission from God, equipping the saints, and building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-16). The candidate for a new Senior Pastor is approved by the Elder Board and submitted to the congregation for appointment, requiring a two-thirds majority vote of the attending members. The reappointment of the Senior Pastor is decided by the Elder Board.” As previously discussed, the Senior Pastor position had been absent since the church's establishment. It was ultimately abolished following the 2012 revision, with its authority and responsibilities transferred to the position of the elders.

¹⁸³ Elias*, “Foreigners in the Promised Land” as the sermon commemorating the 20th anniversary of the church, published in *“Using Me for 20 years” -20th Anniversary Special Issue of GMBC* (2016):26.

¹⁸⁴ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

“God not providing” as Elias* had described, but rather a deliberate decision made by the church's leaders:

We (elders) often discussed this matter at that time. To be honest, finding a senior pastor was actually an easy thing to do...Yes, it was an easy thing, just like the Israelites asking for a king. Then Saul became king, and you know what happened next. We elders, we talked about this many times. We observed that many churches have problems because of their senior pastors. You see, when a person stands at the peak of a mountain, pride and influence will inevitably affect them. Before reaching the peak, a person might be humble and considerate. But once at the summit, power corrupts, and that person changes—their attitude, everything changes.

... Many years ago, when I was in the United States, our church pastor just left. He complained that our church had no pension, poor benefits. He immediately said, “I quit,” and he moved to California. During that difficult time, we came to realize that God teaches us that when we are together, we really should have Christ Jesus as our head. And then all brothers and sisters are important, serving more out of inspiration. Eventually, the church actually thrived more than when the pastor was there. So, I have personally experienced these differences.

Actually, having a senior pastor or not should not affect your love for the Lord, your willingness to commit, your willingness to offer yourself. If the teaching of your church is correct, it does not matter whether you have a senior pastor or not, really, there is no problem. The eldership is rotational, today someone is an elder, later someone else takes over, avoiding one person clinging to power. For the church, a rotation of leadership is not a bad thing.¹⁸⁵

Marios*'s perspective stems from his personal experiences with American churches, which are shared by many early members of GMBC. He echoes Elias*'s concern regarding the potential risk of a single authoritative figure, but further emphasizes the inherent risks and dangers associated with such a figure by invoking the Biblical image of King Saul.

Comparatively, Vasilios* expressed less concern about the senior pastor system itself, but rather the difficulty GMBC faced in finding a suitable candidate. His primary concern centered on the appointment method, specifically rejecting the practice of “parachuting” a senior pastor into the church community. Uniquely, Vasilios* employed the “body of Christ” metaphor to articulate this perspective:

¹⁸⁵ Interview-Marios*-20240312.

The church is an organism. It is supposed to be the Body of Christ. A body grows gradually, like a child growing up. You cannot suddenly say, “Hey, you need to be two feet taller so you can play basketball in the future.” He cannot grow that tall immediately. I actually think that an established church can hardly accept a pastor who is “parachuted in.” You look at those more famous pastors of megachurches, I dare not speak for Chinese churches, for example, like Rick Warren. He started the Saddleback Church when he was twenty-five years old. He started it himself, and he grew up with the church.¹⁸⁶

“Collective” as a Safeguard

Marios*'s emphasis on “rotational eldership” was a consensus within the early elders, as evidenced in the initial church constitution.¹⁸⁷ In this interview, Elias* also emphasized in his interview how this rotation system effectively limits individual power and safeguards the functionality of collective leadership:

Our elders do not serve for life. They serve for a two-year term, with a maximum of three consecutive terms, totaling six years. The seventh year is mandatory ‘rest’... Some assume this is out of consideration for their hard work and dedication, offering them a sort of sabbatical. THAT IS NOT THE CASE. When we say an elder serves for six years and then ‘rests’ for one year, we are essentially resetting their power. Since elder nominations come from within the Elder Board, stepping away means you are not guaranteed for nomination by the next board. It is because we are all human, and even as leaders, we are inherently limited. However, we elders hold a significant influence on the church's overall direction, priorities, and actions. Therefore, when we instituted the six-year term followed by one year of rest, it was essentially a 'power reset' for the elders. So this mechanism exists for two reasons. Firstly, as elders hold significant authority in our church governance, we emphasize “collectiveness” within the Elder Board. Secondly, such significant authority needs regulations to be relinquished and transferred ... I have emphasized this concept repeatedly, yet I still hear coworkers say, 'The

¹⁸⁶ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128.

¹⁸⁷ By-laws of GMBC, 2009, 2012. Nominees for this role must fulfil Biblical qualifications stipulated in 1 Timothy 3:1-13, Titus 1:6-9, and 1 Peter 5:2-3, demonstrating both an exemplary life congruent with Biblical teachings and a minimum of one year's membership. The 2021 by-laws further require candidates to have actively participated in a relevant branch and regularly attended church fellowships for at least a year. Nominations, originating from the Board of Elders, necessitate approval from two-thirds of the congregation. The Board of Elders holds collective authority and responsibility, with individual elders mandated to collaborate with pastors, senior ministers, and ministers in addressing the spiritual needs of the church. As spiritual leaders, they are entrusted with maintaining unity within the church, guided by “Biblical principles” (Matthew 20:26-27, Ephesians 4:2-3). Elders serve a two-year term, renewable for up to three consecutive terms, followed by a mandatory one-year hiatus before potential reinstatement with board confirmation. Notably, upon appointment, non-salaried elders assume the roles of “Members of the Company” and “Directors” within the church's incorporated structure. These items remained the same in the available versions of GMBC by-laws.

elders are tired and deserve a break', ... Sigh.¹⁸⁸

This passage from Elias* regarding elder tenure policies effectively encapsulates the rationale behind the first-generation leaders' approach to constitution-making. It underscores their affirmation of elders as holding the highest authority within the church, their awareness of the inherent limitations of power and human limitations, and consequently, the importance they placed on establishing a collective leadership structure. Thus, this structure aimed to mitigate centralized power and preempt the emergence of a “King Saul” scenario or a “bottleneck” figure.

It is also crucial to note a nuance in Elias*'s statement regarding the rotational eldership. His clarification was necessitated by misinterpretations of the concept, particularly the belief that it was implemented because “elders are tired and deserve a break.” Why did Elias* react so strongly against this specific interpretation? And do the elders really feel tired? These questions will be explored further in the subsequent discussion.

The Missing Leadership Image

When mentioning the “collective leadership model” in the interviews, first-generation leaders frequently emphasized avoiding a “King Saul” figure, likely due to the strong negative connotations associated with that figure. However, they did not explicitly address what would motivate and energize elders to lead effectively within this collective framework. Abstract constitutions, primarily designed to limit power, are insufficient for effective empowerment. Notably, Marios* contains expressions like “(God teaches us) that when we are together, we really should have Christ Jesus as our head,” which allude to some kind of collective imagery. It echoes Elias*'s “all believers are Priests” expression. However, a vivid image comparable to “Home” in Theme I, that effectively portrays the nature and dynamics of this collective leadership is absent.

3.2.2 Unveiling “Soldiers of Christ”: Motivation, Adequacy, and Collaboration

¹⁸⁸ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

This section explores beneath the surface of GMBC's collective leadership model to unveil a hidden force shaping its dynamics, that is, the image of "Soldiers of Christ" through the first-generation elders' practices, language and underlying assumptions. It is important to first distinguish this act from "imposing" an external framework onto the data or attempting to "prove" that this image is the only valid one. It aims to identify an image embedded within existing leadership narratives of the elders, examining its potential to provide a broader understanding of collective leadership, that is, by moving beyond its specific application, whether this image can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of diverse leadership perspectives and reflect the deeply held values of leaders. Therefore, the possible image needs to be communal, simple yet evocative, and deeply rooted in the leaders' cognition, emotions, and experiences.

Considering these attributes, potential candidates mentioned by the first generation of elders include "priests," "body of Christ," and "soldiers of Christ." While "priests" possess a communal aspect, they lack thick description and development within the elders' narratives and have weak connections to other images. "The body of Christ," though potentially present in the elders' beliefs and rich in theological interpretation, lacks practical application in their narratives. In contrast, "Soldiers of Christ" emerges as a clearer, communal image, particularly when Elias* constructs a "Military Camp" church image directly linked to practical concerns. What remains to be clarified is whether this image, used by Elias* to engage the congregation, genuinely reflects the leadership philosophy of the first generation of elders and, in practice, shapes and influences their leadership approach.

Below is to show that three factors crucial to the collective leadership emerge from the data—motivation, adequacy, and collaboration—converge effectively under the "soldiers of Christ" image. This convergence not only confirms that the "soldiers of Christ" image is a consistent pattern across multiple dimensions of leadership but also provides a clear framework for understanding this underlying image. Through this lens, the nature of generational differences in leadership practices becomes discernible (discussed in the next section).

Unwavering Mission: The Ultimate Motivation

The first generation of GMBC elders arrived in Hong Kong with a strong sense of mission, particularly focused on evangelizing to the Chinese people. The enthusiasm inherent in this “Mission” aligns closely with the image of “Soldiers of Christ.”

As discussed in the previous theme, they established the church not for personal enjoyment but as a tool for evangelistic mission. In pursuit of this goal, they perceive themselves as “soldiers” engaged in a spiritual battle, striving to expand God's kingdom and win souls for Christ.¹⁸⁹ This sense of mission imbues their leadership with urgency, purpose, and unwavering dedication. Language such as “fighting for the Lord,” “winning souls,” and “conquering the promised land” reveals this militaristic undertone. It can be argued that the concept of “mission” itself carries strong militaristic connotations for these elders, and thus the “soldier” mentality drives them to sacrifice personal comfort, endure hardship, and persevere through challenges.

Disciplined Dedication: Role Models of Adequacy

The “Soldiers of Christ” image also embodied in the first generation's understanding of leadership adequacy. They believe that effective leaders must have certain qualities, such as personal excellence, self-discipline, and integrity.

The first generation of elders, confident in their extensive social and managerial experience, as evidenced by the Vasilios*'s statement “running a church is not that difficult”. However, they placed a greater emphasis on self-discipline and integrity. Vasilios* offered a telling account of how he kept such integrity among the various roles:

I do not think my leadership style is the only way. There are different styles and approaches. But at least I am consistent, inside and out. Especially for our co-workers, some of them are my colleagues from the university, right? They could see how I act in the workplace and in church. If I act like a devil in one place and an angel in another, it would be like “schizophrenic”. That wouldn't be good. So I am always consistent.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁹ Elias*, Sermon PPT Slides “Kingdom and Household – Using My Twenty Years”, Dec 2015. This sermon, part of the GMBC 20th anniversary sermon series.

¹⁹⁰ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128.

Vasilios*'s personal integrity, exemplified by his insistence on being “consistent,” profoundly impacts his leadership practice. This unwavering commitment to a high moral standard naturally engenders trust and respect, while also lending moral legitimacy to situations where he needs to confront others.¹⁹¹

Furthermore, they strive to be “good examples” for the congregation, modelling a life of faith, devotion, and moral uprightness. This emphasis on personal character and spiritual maturity aligns with the image of a disciplined and virtuous soldier, ready to lead by example and inspire others to follow. As Marios* addresses the requirement of commitment in the church as an elder:

If you are not willing to dedicate more time, it becomes a significant problem because the church requires substantial commitment. And you know, as elders, we have to set good examples. If we don't, how can we ask others to do it? ¹⁹²

Marios*'s emphasis on dedication also implicitly suggests the first generation of elders possessed ample time and energy. Marios* acknowledges that these individuals, already “over 45 years old” upon assuming eldership, held stable, established social roles, and typically had children living independently. And, of course, they dedicated this abundance of time and energy to the church.

Notably, this emphasis on disciplined dedication is not merely a theological preference; it is deeply rooted in the first generation's specific migration trajectory. Entered the United States as skilled professionals, their lives were defined by a need for immense perseverance to achieve success in a new country. Their professional accomplishments were hard-won victories, forging a self-perception as resilient fighters who overcome obstacles through discipline and dedication. The "Soldier of Christ" metaphor, therefore, is an embodied one that resonates powerfully with their lived experience of struggle and achievement. This background helps explain their confidence in leadership and their expectation that commitment should be

¹⁹¹ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128. The context of the paragraph is a conversation where I asked Vasilios* if he'd ever had to make a tough decision as a leader. He responded with an example from his time in the United States, where he confronted and ultimately dismissed a controversial preacher.

¹⁹² Interview-Marios*-20240312.

demonstrated through unwavering, disciplined action.

“Comrades in Arms”: The Dynamics of Collaboration

The vivid image of “comrades in arms,” (*zhanyou*, 戰友) united in a common cause and working together to achieve a shared objective, emerges from Elias*'s description. When asked about the relationships among the first generation of leaders and whether they had opportunities to bond, he explained:

Relatively speaking... it (personal bonding) is less common. Our church grew rapidly for the first fifteen years, so the camaraderie between us, it's like we're “comrades in arms”, forged while working together. We never schedule trips or meals to socialize. I've noticed we often have meals with another family for pastoral care. The relationship was... very purpose-driven.¹⁹³

This 'purpose-driven' collaboration, rather than one founded solely on personal relationships, aligns well with the 'soldier' imagery, reflecting the emphasis on mission accomplishment over personal feelings often found in military contexts. This “comrades in arms” mentality resonates within Vasilios*. When discussing his role as a Vasilios* founder, he emphasized the importance of teamwork:

I'm just one of the so-called founders, you know. Um, if you want me to sum up this experience, it really isn't something one person can handle on their own—you absolutely need several teammates. They're the ones who commit, *rain or shine*... I mean, you need colleagues who are with you, *rain or shine*, all in the same boat. There's just no way one person can do it alone.¹⁹⁴

While subsequent analysis (3.2.4) reveals more nuanced dynamics within Vasilios*'s described teamwork, his genuine belief in collective leadership toward a shared goal is clear in his reiterated emphasis on steadfast commitment (*rain or shine*). Notably, he uses phrasing similar to Nasos*'s “in the same boat” image, though referring to the leadership team rather than the entire GMBC congregation as Nasos* did.

In addition, a case of the purpose-driven “pastoral care” between Vasilios* and Pantelis* also add some nuances to the “comrades in arms” relationship. As Pantelis* shared, during his preparation for eldership, there was a period when his

¹⁹³ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

¹⁹⁴ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128.

marriage faced a crisis. Vasilios*'s support proved invaluable in navigating that challenging time. Recalling Vasilios*'s style of caring, Pantelis* described Vasilios* as a strictly punctual individual who meticulously managed his time. Whenever their conversations reached the predetermined end time, Vasilios* would politely but firmly interrupt, saying, "OK, we're done for today. See you next time." Pantelis* then mentioned a guestbook in Vasilios*'s house for visitors to sign, which I had also seen at his home but interpreted as a North American cultural custom. Pantelis* chuckled and revealed:

You know he's an IT professor... So he actually used that guestbook to calculate the frequency of each visitor's appearance. When he knew that someone needed special care recently, he would adjust the frequency of appointments accordingly. ¹⁹⁵

I was surprised to hear this and asked him, "Don't you feel offended?" Pantelis* replied seriously,

No, I feel very moved by him. Think about it, we all know that Vasilios* is a highly rational person, sometimes like a "nerd", you know, who can be emotionally reserved. It's not in his nature to be adept at providing emotional support. So what compels him to work so diligently to learn how to do something he is not good at, even in such an unconventional way? It can only be God's love!¹⁹⁶

Pantelis*'s interpretation reveals a key characteristic of the first-generation elders' relationships and collaboration: while not necessarily inclined towards close personal bonds, they were not lacking in emotion. Though perhaps not openly expressed, they exhibit a tangible sense of mutual care and trust, similar to comrades who have shared years of battlefield experience. This strong sense of shared purpose united them, reflecting a defining trait of such a military analogy: a willingness to not only contribute their strengths but also to overcome obstacles in areas where they might not naturally excel.

Synthesizing these three factors, a portrait of the "soldiers of Christ" as a collective leadership model perceived by the first-generation elders can be sketched as: They

¹⁹⁵ Interview-Pantelis*-20220727.

¹⁹⁶ Interview-Pantelis*-20220727.

are a group of leaders deeply committed to their mission of evangelism. They are disciplined, principled, and possess a strong sense of duty. Their leadership is characterized by a focus on action and achieving goals, often prioritizing this over personal needs or emotional expression. While they may not necessarily be naturally gifted in all areas of leadership, their dedication to serving the church compels them to find ways to compensate for any perceived shortcomings. Their collaboration style resembles a well-coordinated unit, working together effectively towards a common objective, even if personal bonds remain primarily functional. They are driven by a shared sense of purpose and a conviction in their collective responsibility to fulfil their duty.

3.2.3 “Soldiers” Under Strain: When an Empowering Image Becomes a Burden

The collective leadership model established by the first generation of elders at GMBC was widely regarded as effective in the church's early years. However, as a new generation of leaders steps into these roles, a different story is unfolding. The second-generation elders, while inheriting the same model, are facing a unique set of challenges and expressing growing disillusionment with the demands of leadership. This section explores the growing pains experienced by GMBC's collective leadership model, arguing that the transmitted “Soldiers of Christ” image, a source of strength and motivation for the first generation, has become a central source of strain and disillusionment for the second. This shift is examined across the three key aspects – adequacy, motivation, and collaboration – revealing the limitations of the “soldier” image within a changing context.

Sense of Inadequacy: The Unattainable Example

The challenge of adequacy is addressed first, as a growing sense of personal frustration emerged among second-generation elders, primarily manifesting as feelings of inadequacy. This stems not only from the substantial demands placed upon them but also from the idealized image of the “soldier” leader. They struggle to embody the expected strength, resilience, and unwavering commitment this image represents. However, the pressures of career, family, and church responsibilities create a constant tension, leaving them feeling overwhelmed and unable to fully embody the “soldier” ideal.

As Pantelis* recalled, during a period when his factory was in crisis, his wife was experiencing emotional distress, and he was caring for five children (the youngest being a newborn). He recounted in a church meeting:

We were discussing the church's vision. And, um, Elias* mentioned, the vision should be “We are soldiers of Christ,” or something like that... And I wasn't very comfortable with that statement. Because the way he emphasized being “soldiers of Christ” implied being free from family and worldly ties—of course, these are all in the Scriptures, but still, hearing it made me feel a little uncomfortable and even hurt. It was like... it implied that in my current state, because I am tied to my family and children, I am not a soldier of Christ. That was the feeling I got.¹⁹⁷

This example confirms the first-generation leaders', particularly Elias**s, adherence to the “soldier” image, while simultaneously providing a clear illustration of the distress it causes the second generation. The struggles related to family, work, and church resonated with several younger second-generation leaders like Kyriakos*, Stavros*, and Gavriil*, echoing Michail* and Pantelis**s experiences. This constant tension and inadequacy bred frustration and guilt.

Beyond feeling stretched thin and operating reactively (in Neofytos**s words) rather than proactively guiding the church with a long-term vision, there was a pervasive lack of time for theological reflection. As Neofytos* commented regarding a discussion about introducing Timothy Keller's works to GMBC initiated by Nasos* in 2019:

Someone might suggest we adopt Tim Keller's model, but then someone else points out limitations with that approach and suggests we look at John Stott. You know, for lay members like us, researching someone like Tim Keller is manageable. But to incorporate John Stott's perspective... that's a whole other endeavor... With our limited time and abilities, we'd have to thoroughly study John Stott just to have an informed conversation, let alone convince anyone. So, in the end, these things just fizzle out.¹⁹⁸

Neofytos**s words clearly illustrate this challenge, particularly highlighting the sense of inadequacy as a lay person in terms of formal theology. It further highlights a

¹⁹⁷ Interview-Pantelis*-20220727.

¹⁹⁸ Interview-Neofytos*-20220728.

deeper generational shift that reflects evolving trends within Western evangelicalism itself. The first generation's pragmatic, mission-focused approach echoes the era of influential figures like John Stott and the "purpose-driven" strategies popularized by Rick Warren. In contrast, the second generation's interest in Keller signals an alignment with a more recent, gospel-centered movement that emphasizes nuanced cultural engagement and urban ministry. The tension between these theological eras helps explain the difficulty in finding consensus, as the two generations are, in effect, drawing from different streams of the evangelical tradition to address the church's challenges.

In addition to the pressures of career and family responsibilities often associated with their younger age, age itself presents a source of pressure. Gavriil*, when discussing the generational differences between elders, prioritized the age difference:

One aspect is definitely age. For example, when they stood on the pulpit, everyone was younger than them. When I stand on the pulpit, everyone is older than me, which creates a different feeling... Facing older people, whether preaching, praying, or leading worship, I always feel a certain... pressure. After all, they are older, and they likely have more life experience, knowledge, and wisdom than I do. How can I understand their needs from the pulpit and serve them effectively? This is not easy for me.¹⁹⁹

These examples highlight a painful gap between the idealized expectations associated with the "soldier" image and the lived realities of service members. This disconnect fosters feelings of frustration and guilt, consequently diminishing motivation and hindering effective leadership.

Challenged collaboration: the ineffective teamwork

Interview data frequently cited the effectiveness of GMBC's collective leadership, particularly concerning the performance of the elder board, as a pressing issue. This directly correlates with the previous point: the strain of multiple roles leaves elders stretched thin, hindering their ability to dedicate time and energy to church matters. This lack of pre-meeting research and communication, in turn, renders decision-

¹⁹⁹ Interview-Gavriil*-20220811.

making during church meetings more arduous and protracted, further exacerbating the burden of meetings and creating a vicious cycle. Under these circumstances, cultivating the camaraderie of “comrades in arms” becomes incredibly difficult, and even basic team functionality is questionable.

Michail* emphasized the demanding nature of church leadership, describing it as “working overtime at the company during the week, attending church services or small groups on weekends, and then attending elder meetings on weekend evenings.”²⁰⁰ When asked about the impact on family life, he acknowledged the significant sacrifices made by his wife:

Sometimes there are a lot of church meetings, and my wife does feel, “Wow, you have so many meetings! You are so devoted to church, but you also need to be a father at home.” So of course she complains. I usually tell her that these meetings are necessary and unavoidable. I've already declined or postponed some of them. And now I usually tell her in advance, like “I might be busy this weekend, but I can make it up to you. We can go out as a family afterwards.” So, she is slowly adapting... Of course, she has also sacrificed a lot. It's really not easy being an elder's wife... There have been some difficult times, especially last year, when some crises emerged. Finally, I had some good conversations with her and made some adjustments. I told her that sometimes it just can't be helped, but I will pay more attention in the future. She also needs to adjust. I think this requires sacrifice and compromise from both of us.²⁰¹

The words “adapting”, “adjustment”, “sacrifice”, and “compromise” —terms that predominantly describe his wife's accommodation to his demanding leadership role—vividly illustrate the tension and struggle Michail* and his wife faced in balancing their responsibilities to both the church and their family. To navigate these competing demands, Michail* described a strategy of proactive communication. When aware of upcoming church meetings on weekends, he would call a “family meeting” with his wife and three children.

Ironically, Michail* observed that the increased frequency of meetings did not effectively address these challenges. He complains about the detrimental impact of insufficient preparation and relationship-building on the efficiency of the meeting:

²⁰⁰ Interview-Michail*-20220801.

²⁰¹ Interview-Michail*-20220801.

Our meetings ... (Sigh) we often just focus on the issue at hand, as if we are only supposed to solve problems during the meeting. Actually, in many cases, you should do some groundwork beforehand, communicate with others in advance, get some feedback. That way, when you bring it up at the meeting, it'll be much more effective. Otherwise, if you just throw it out there, it becomes like a typical company meeting, everyone just going back and forth with their own points. I don't think that is appropriate for a church, an 'organic community of faith'. I feel there will always be shortcomings with that approach. So, personally, I believe those private, personal connections are still very important.²⁰²

Notably, Michail*'s desire was not a return to the purpose-driven, militaristic efficiency of the first generation. Instead, he envisioned a robust collaboration characterized by an "organic community of faith" bound by rich "private, personal connections"—an image that stands in stark contrast to that of "soldiers."

Strained Motivation: The Diffused Mission and Ownership

Both individually and collectively, the reality of second-generation leadership presented a stark contrast to the "soldier" image's expectations of excellence, efficiency, aggression, and energy. This discrepancy itself significantly impacted the team's motivation.

Furthermore, this decline in motivation was compounded by a shifting focus in mission, driven by evolving societal contexts and congregational needs. Unlike the first generation's detachment from Hong Kong society, the second-generation leaders embraced faith and built their lives within the city. Their faith journey, intertwined with that of their congregation, unfolded amidst the complexities of Hong Kong's daily life. Conversion was not their primary objective, nor that of the congregation they led. This multifaceted approach to faith diverged gradually from the singular focus inherent in the "soldier" image.

Lastly, Neofytos* sharply points out a more structural issue within the collective leadership: the "lack of ownership" resulting from the diffusion of responsibility. This is evident in his reflection on the elders' meeting inefficiency:

²⁰² Interview-Michail*-20220801.

We have a very collective leadership—a board of elders, right? When one or two people spend a lot of time researching and understanding a model, then have to present it, you know? Most attendants (referring to the elders), maybe even half, just don't care. They don't think we need it... things were fine before, so why change? Then there are a couple, maybe a few—I won't say half—who are indifferent. And then a few others who say, “Just do whatever, we'll go along with it.” However, They don't feel any “ownership”.²⁰³

“Ownership” in this context implies proactively taking responsibility and driving implementation, while “lack of ownership” suggests a passive response. As a highly efficient and socially respected member of the “financial elite,” Neofytos*'s frustration with this experience was palpable during the interview. He even questioned the feasibility of such collective leadership, stating that “leadership cannot be shared.” Indeed, his observations hint at a more profound shift in power dynamics, which will be explored further in the following section.

3.2.4 Interpreting Leadership Dynamics: “Soldiers” in the Landscape

The “Soldiers of Christ” image, while rarely explicitly articulated, offers a powerful lens through which to understand the complexities and tensions within GMBC's collective leadership model. This section examines how this image illuminates unspoken power dynamics and evolving relationship between mission and belonging within the church.

“Hidden Commander” and the Misperceived Equality

The lens of the “Soldiers of Christ” image reveals a subtle yet crucial dynamic of power within GMBC's collective leadership model, one that might be overlooked through a purely institutional analysis. The image carries strong connotations of hierarchical authority and an emphasis on “command and execution.” This seemingly contradicts the emphasis on “collectiveness” in leadership advocated by both generations of elders, particularly their rejection of a hierarchical senior pastor model. This apparent gap warrants further examination.

Re-examining the data through this lens reveals subtle differences in how the two generations generally describe collective leadership. Second-generation elders often

²⁰³ Interview-Neofytos*-20220728.

directly link “collectiveness” with “equality,” implying equal distribution of power among members. However, this specific phrasing is absent in the narratives of the first generation, who instead emphasise the model's effectiveness in limiting “excessive power.” This discrepancy suggests a potential difference in their understanding of power dynamics.

Further investigation reveals that within the first generation's leadership team, Vasilios* might have functioned as a “hidden commander” within the “army.” Examining his descriptions of his “personal style” through this lens sheds new light on their significance. For example, when recalling the GMBC's early days, he states:

Do you know Dr. M (psudonym)? He was also one of the early co-workers. Sometimes, I had some disagreements with him. Actually, I did not notice it at first. Once, during a colleague meeting, M slammed the table, stood up, and said, “Why does everyone listen to you and not me?” I said, “I don't know either!” (laugh) But I think this, ... well, this is ... quite natural... ²⁰⁴

Vasilios*'s remark, “quite natural,” suggests that he was not surprised by his influence within the team. Indeed, he is the most frequently mentioned and universally respected elder across both generations in the interviews. While his integrity and care are widely acknowledged, another facet of his leadership, revealed only through his own description of his “personal style,” was less mentioned by other interviewees:

(When serving as an elder) I set the agenda for every meeting to guide our discussion. During the discussion, I do not offer my opinion immediately. I let everyone speak, perhaps offering a little guidance. If asked for my opinion, I might say, 'I want to hear your discussion.' If everyone comes to an agreement, I will make the final decision. That is our process. I use this approach in society (the university) as well. I take the lead on the agenda, someone takes notes, and I review the minutes to ensure my opinions are reflected. This way everyone feels respected, and the decision is seen as a collective one, not just mine. This is my leadership style. ²⁰⁵

These actions reveal how Vasilios* carefully yet intentionally wielded his personal influence within the team, ensuring coherence in decision-making. However, this essentially authoritative supervision by Vasilios* also relied on the tacit consent and

²⁰⁴ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128.

²⁰⁵ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128.

support of the majority. This delicate balance of power was crucial to the effectiveness of their collective leadership. Supporting this observation, internal conflicts regarding GMBC's development route emerged only after Vasilios*'s departure. Additionally, Michail*'s previously mentioned observation of meetings lacking preparation and Neofytos*'s complaints of “indifference” and the diffusion of responsibility within the team dynamics further suggest the absence of a figure like Vasilios* in the new leadership team.

However, Vasilios*'s description also reveals a deliberate downplaying of his unique influence during team interactions, aiming to ensure “the decision is seen as a collective one, not just mine” so that “everyone feels respected.” While this approach might have stemmed from a desire to foster morale or reflect his personal humility regarding power, it effectively obscured this crucial aspect of leadership from future generations. Although the first generation rejected a formal hierarchy like the “senior pastor” model, they did not entirely eliminate the informal leadership arising from personality, experience, and respect. The “hidden” aspect of Vasilios*'s leadership is crucial to understanding the dynamics at play. It explains why the second generation, unfamiliar with these subtle dynamics, might perceive the model as purely egalitarian. This also highlights the potential fragility of the collective leadership model when solely backed by the image of “soldiers.” Without an effective commander, as the post-Vasilios* crisis suggests, the group risks becoming aimless or chaotic, much like scattered soldiers lacking direction.

“Soldiers” and “Home”: The Tension Between Mission and Belongingness in Leadership

Comparing the image of leaders as “soldiers” with the “home/family” image as the church used in the first theme reveals the dynamics within GMBC's leadership. As previously noted, some first-generation elders exhibited a peculiar tension in their self-perception: while adopting the “home/family” metaphor for the church, they did not necessarily feel a sense of belonging within this group and even resisted the image of “father”. The “soldiers” metaphor suggests they may have perceived Hong Kong as a “battlefield.” They treated their own families as combat units, striving to create and safeguard a home for Hong Kong drifters through their struggles, a place

where these individuals could find belonging in life and faith. However, these elders themselves did not seek permanent belonging and were prepared to withdraw upon fulfilling their duty. Their deeper mission was to select and train more “soldiers of Christ” from within this community, using themselves and their families as examples, to continue the crusade of evangelizing to the Chinese people.

However, the crises of meeting space and displacement engendered a sense of frustration among the first-generation elders regarding their duty to “safeguard the home,” while also increasing the pressure to train new recruits for the ongoing battle. Consequently, certain leaders attempted to project this “soldier” image onto the entire congregation, even attempting to shift the original “home” towards a “military camp.” Simultaneously, they appointed a group of younger elders, expecting them to swiftly embrace this militaristic identity and join the ranks as the new generation of warriors. Elias*'s concerns about the second-generation leaders' shortcomings as role models expressed during the interview, reflect this anxiety:

Now, our next generation of elders, their spouses, some are in a particular stage of family life. Some have personal burdens or gifts that are not in this area, so they have not been able to contribute in our (referring to the first-generation elders) way. ... However, as an elder, he himself must be a good role model to bring up this kind of Godly family. It should be his life. So, I don't know how to put it... It's a way of life where the whole family dedicates themselves together. Anyway, this has become a model, at least in Chinese churches in America.

The more role models like this the church have, the easier it will be to influence this kind of family. On the contrary, if you don't see a role model, people won't even think about it... But if there is a family that seems to give everyone this image: the whole family is dedicated, and God has blessed them, then there may be more families willing to embark on this journey of faith.²⁰⁶

Evidently, Elias*'s conviction that “the whole family is dedicated, and God has blessed them” could easily unsettle leaders and congregants grappling with familial challenges. Furthermore, his stringent “role model” expectations, imposed not only on elders but also their spouses, could appear unrealistic and insensitive. Consequently, the deeply ingrained “soldier” image he held faced significant

²⁰⁶ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

resistance within the church community.

Soldiers in the Same Ship

In contrast to Elias*, Nasos*'s portrayal of the church evolved from a militarized institution to a “ship adrift.” This shift, however, maintains conceptual continuity through the “soldier” metaphor. While the “ship adrift” symbolizes the uncertainty and disorientation within GMBC, it also reflects Nasos*'s equanimity and realism in the face of adversity. Despite the bleakness of the imagery, Nasos*'s emphasis on communal belonging and his refusal to “abandon the ship” underscore an unwavering commitment to the church, akin to a steadfast soldier. This revised image, however, emphasizes a deeper sense of shared fate and solidarity with the congregation as a leader.

3.2.5 Beyond “Soldiers”: Emerging Images of Collective Leadership

The dominant presence of the “soldiers” image, coupled with the perceived inefficiencies of the collective leadership model, has at times marginalized the second-generation elders' own perspectives on leadership. This section explores the alternative visions of leadership emerging from the second generation, highlighting their diverse attempts to move beyond the limitations of the “soldier. This also raises a crucial question: should efficiency take precedence over collective leadership, or should a new path be forged that embraces limitations and vulnerabilities?

A CEO for GMBC?

Ioannis*, while not directly criticizing the current model, offered an alternative image of church leadership, drawing a comparison to a commercial company:

One might argue that a church is fundamentally different from a company, and in many ways, they are. However, from a certain perspective, they share similarities. A company has a boss, and in a church, that boss is God, isn't it? A company strives for profitability, correct? The church does too, but instead of financial gain, the church's profit is a growing number of people worshipping God, right? So, while the objects are different, the underlying thinking and direction are the same.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁷ Interview-Ioannis*-20240402.

Ioannis* envisions an ideally functioning organization, whether a business or a church, as one with harmonized operations geared towards a central objective. For businesses, this often involves employing a professional CEO to oversee all aspects of the work. He appears to suggest that a similar approach, potentially with a “CEO-like” leader, could benefit the church in achieving its mission. While Ioannis*’s “CEO” leadership image shares similarities with the existing “soldier” image in terms of efficiency, execution and focus on objectives, its limited theological depth and reliance on centralized power present significant limitations. Moreover, a more practical concern arises: can a lay leader realistically dedicate the necessary time and energy to such a demanding role? Ultimately, this model fails to resonate with the second-generation elders at GMBC.

Go Back to the Senior Pastor System?

Neofytos* presents the most explicit critique of GMBC's leadership model. During the interview, he stated: “When I studied the Bible, the early church, I found that God's commission was given to one leader to lead the people, in other words, the 'single leader' model.” He mentioned attending a Chinese church in Singapore where the senior pastor operated “like a dictator,” a leadership style he found unproblematic. He believes the role of lay leaders is to follow and support a theologically trained, authoritative pastoral leader, implementing that leader’s vision without excessive questioning—as long as that leader remains Biblically and ethically grounded. To “avoid misunderstanding,” he added this deliberate clarification during the interview transcript review, commenting on GMBC's leadership situation:

I believe that a church model led by lay leaders, who lack systematic theological training and serve the church in their spare time, and who also serve as the primary pulpit ministers, is a compromised leadership model. While it may play a positive role in specific periods and contexts, it is not the most beneficial or healthy approach in the long run, especially when the church grows into a local community church with a diverse congregation. In the case of GMBC, this compromise is the result of both its historical tradition and current practical challenges, making it very difficult to change both subjectively and objectively.²⁰⁸

²⁰⁸ This text was sent to me by Neofytos* after reviewing the transcript via WhatsApp. He revised the wording three times and this is the last one.

At this point, he had already stepped down from his elder role due to his family's relocation to the United States. He told me that he had not found a “suitable opportunity” to communicate these thoughts to the other elders even now, making me the first recipient of his perspective. My immediate impression upon hearing this was whether his reluctance stemmed from a fear of encountering “indifference” towards his carefully considered ideas yet again.

Indeed, Neofytos* acutely sensed the absence of a figure to authoritatively assume responsibility within the team, a role previously occupied by Vasilios* as the “hidden commander.” However, Neofytos*'s suggestion to revert to a senior pastor model presents a poignant irony: while Vasilios* and other first-generation elders established the current collective leadership model by rejecting the “otherness” of the senior pastor system, Neofytos* now positions them as the “other.” Yet, even if such a reversion were to occur, would it not risk replicating the very issues of excessive power concentration, leading to a perpetual pendulum swing?

“Sheep Leading Sheep”?

While Neofytos* and Ioannis* expressed reservations, the majority of second-generation elders maintained their support for the collective leadership model, albeit with a nuanced understanding. The second generation's emphasis on “group” identity and shared learning suggests a potential shift away from the “soldier” mentality towards a more collaborative and vulnerable approach to leadership.

For instance, the second-generation elders have their unique understanding of the “collective leadership model”, as Stavros* mentioned:

In the past, each elder was able to “fight alone” (獨擋一面), they could independently establish a church, or at least a Bible study group. They were ‘experienced through countless battles’ (身經百戰) in various aspects of service and adept in handling pastoral issues, embodying the ability to “fight alone”. This might also reflect the expectations of the congregation, hoping that elders could lead in all aspects, right? Now, we current elders, objectively speaking, ..., don't seem to stand out as much in their ability to “fight alone”. Today's elders appear more as a 'group'(群體) where each person has their deficiencies, and everyone brings only a little to the table. However, there is now a conscious recognition that we are a 'group.' The efficiency of a group

is, of course, very low, but it also presents many opportunities for collective learning. We are all learners, sharing and discussing together. Some things are unclear because pastoral experiences vary among us, unlike the past elders. Our experience is limited, but we have more time to share, discuss, and learn as a group.²⁰⁹

Initially, it is noteworthy that Stavros*'s praise for the first-generation elders employs two Chinese idiomatic expressions (marked in the text) heavily laden with military connotations, aligning perfectly with the “soldiers” image. He further highlights this as the “congregation's expectation”—a standard difficult for current elders to attain. However, he also introduces qualities distinct from this image: leaders as a “group”—“each person has their deficiencies, and everyone brings only a little to the table.” Unlike the first generation who could “fight alone” independently, this “group” model embraces flaws and limitations and is built on interdependence. Despite being “inefficient,” they demonstrate a willingness to learn together. This self-perception of “learners,” as articulated by Stavros*, diverges from Elias*'s self-proclaimed identities of “giver” and “teacher.” Within Stavros*'s narrative, this concept seems to mitigate the sense of inadequacy arising from comparisons with predecessors. Yet, his understanding of the “group's” interdependence and shared growth resonates more with Michail*'s “organic organization” concept, pointing towards a new form of interpersonal relationship.

Stavros*'s perspective likely stems, in part, from a painful awakening to human nature witnessed through conflicts within the leadership. SnL's interview repeatedly underscores the profound impact and “torment” of that experience:

I had never thought about it before... we assumed that they should be... everyone should be... it seems like life should be on an upward trajectory with the years and experiences of following the Lord... Yes, now it seems that human nature is not like that; human nature isn't such that as your knowledge and experience grows, you become stronger and stronger.²¹⁰

He further described the emotional “challenges” and the process he went through:

The challenge, because it was different from what I had expected, um, that was a disillusionment for me, a shattering of illusions, and that process, of

²⁰⁹ Interview-Kyriakos*-20221008.

²¹⁰ Interview-Kyriakos*-20221008.

course, when I think about it now, was a very... tormenting time. I use 'tormenting' because it lasted quite a long time... it went beyond my assumptions and expectations, and that process was very agonising. But then one day it suddenly occurred to me that people are weak, and after that thought emerged, it was as if the tension inside me relaxed a little bit, just a little bit. I was always struggling to understand what was going on, with a lot of regrets, wondering why things had developed this way? In the end, one insight that came to me was that people are weak, and maybe that was when the various complex emotions inside me were somewhat released, somewhat alleviated.²¹¹

Stavros* characterizes this experience as “disillusionment,” “a shattering of illusions”—the “illusion” being his previous perception of a role model capable of becoming “stronger and stronger.” The key to his emergence from this “torment” was the “awareness of human frailty,” encompassing both the weaknesses of others and his own. His repeated emphasis on the English word “awareness” suggests this realization holds profound significance for his personal faith and understanding of church leadership.

Despite witnessing the first generation's weaknesses so acutely, Stavros* still describes them with the admiration reserved for powerful heroes, ironically underscoring the deeply ingrained influence of the “soldiers” image in his mind. Furthermore, while the first generation consciously designed their leadership model to mitigate excessive power based on an awareness of human frailty, their concurrent promotion of the “soldiers” image and the portrayal of leaders as flawless role models ultimately obscured this vulnerability. This suggests that the disillusionment Stavros* describes may be, in the long run, unavoidable within the church community.

Stavros*'s notion of a “group” resonates with the second-generation leaders, yet the variations in their expressions suggest it remains an image awaiting full articulation. Kyriakos*, for instance, employs “together” to encapsulate this concept and explores the biblical image of “sheep” as a reflection of this shared leadership:

It's not the elders who really shepherd the church. It's the Lord Jesus, right?
So what do you, as an elder, do? We, if all are shepherded by the Lord Jesus,

²¹¹ Interview-Kyriakos*-20221008.

then I'm also a sheep, right? Being an elder means that a sheep is leading sheep. Maybe the elder has experienced God's grace a bit more, has more years, or his life has been changed by such experiences, and then he leads other sheep on the path to sanctification. This is very important. As for the testimony of life, I think it's very important. It means that even if I have fallen, look, God's grace has led me to rise from where I fell, to follow Him again, to receive again. I think this life testimony is especially important.²¹²

It is significant that this image of “sheep leading sheep” not only conveys Kyriakos*'s self-perception as a leader, but also carries theological weight concerning the relationship between leaders and Christ as sheep and shepherd. Furthermore, the concept of “testimony” as invoked by Kyriakos* does not evoke an image of unattainable perfection or strength. Instead, it embraces the possibility of human frailty and “falling,” all within the protective embrace of Jesus the Shepherd. Finally, this image conveys a distinct impression of a “collective leadership” team characterised by equality before Jesus, grounded in their shared identity with the congregation as “all sheep.” This resonates with Nasos*'s sentiment of being “in the same boat.”

However, this image inevitably evokes connotations of “herd mentality” or “groupthink.” While it highlights aspects neglected by the “soldiers” image, it does not yet offer a complete solution to complex issues such as power dynamics, personal influence, and practical effectiveness.

These emerging images of collective leadership, while not yet fully formed, offer promising avenues for theological construction. They point towards a model that embraces vulnerability, interdependence, and shared learning, reflecting the second generation's lived experiences and their evolving understanding of what it means to lead faithfully within a maturing church community. Further theological development is therefore essential.

3.3 Biblical Faith: Both Anchor and Battleground of GMBC's Leadership

²¹² Interview-Kyriakos*-20221008.

Though the Bible itself does not have a metaphorical image like “Home” or “Soldiers” in the previous sections, it functions as the fertile ground from which these images emerge, are interpreted, and ultimately, shape the landscape of leadership at GMBC. This section explores how the Bible, while upheld as the ultimate source of authority, operates in a more nuanced and dynamic way within the lived experiences of GMBC's leaders, functioning as both a source of authority and a site of interpretation and contestation.

This section reveals how the elders, while seeking Divine guidance from Scripture, also grapple with the reality of diverse interpretations, personal experiences, and cultural influences shaping their understanding of the Bible. This section begins by examining how the principle of “Biblical Faith” was strategically employed by the church's founders to legitimize its non-denominational identity and lay leadership structure. The analysis then traces the transmission of this legacy to the second generation of leaders, revealing the challenges they face in navigating increasingly complex situations with a primarily Biblicistic approach. Finally, the research delves into the two distinct yet interconnected ways in which the Bible is employed by GMBC's leaders: as a symbol of unquestionable authority and as a wellspring of evocative images. By illuminating these dynamics, this section provides a deeper understanding of how the Bible shapes not only leadership decisions but also the very fabric of belief and practice within GMBC.

3.3.1 Establishing a “Bible Church”: Legitimacy, Legacy, and Gaps

From its inception, GMBC has defined itself by its commitment to the Bible. This section examines how this principle, strategically employed by the founding generation, legitimized the non-denominational church and fostered unity within its diverse nascent congregation. Furthermore, it analyses how this legacy of “Biblical Faith,” while providing a seemingly unshakeable foundation, also reveals tensions between the ideal and the reality of leadership practice.

Founding the Church on “Biblical Faith”

The inclusion of “Bible Church” in GMBC's name reflects its adherence to Biblical faith. Founding elder Vasilios* explained that this decision served as a pragmatic solution to the challenges posed by the church's diversity. As Vasilios* mentioned, he and “some other founders”²¹³ were aware of the “Bible Church Movement” in the US at that time:

... They (the participants of the Bible Church movement) felt that the large denominations had become stagnant. They needed to branch out because they believed that many of the denominational traditions in those churches didn't necessarily have a Biblical basis. These had become traditions that were set in the past for certain reasons and had since become immutable. So they left (their denominations) and decided to use 'Bible Church' in the names of their new church communities...²¹⁴

This concept, as Vasilios* explained, was instrumental in founding GMBC.

Our co-workers came from all over the world, each with a variety of backgrounds. This meant that as a Bible church, we were focused on doing one thing— “narrowing” the message (of the Bible), not broadening it. 'Narrow' means that we only insist on the essentials which are clearly stated in the Bible. ... So I often say, if you come to our church, leave your traditions at the door as you step out of the elevator and enter the church. If you can't let go of your traditions, then don't come. ²¹⁵

Vasilios* envisioned GMBC as a “Bible church,” a model he believed was crucial for unifying a congregation characterized by diverse backgrounds. By emphasizing the Bible as the shared foundation and de-emphasizing denominational differences, Vasilios* aimed to cultivate an inclusive community united by a common commitment to Scripture. However, Vasilios*'s reference to the “Bible Church movement” stood out in my interviews, and I found no similar mentions in the existing literature on GMBC that indicated such a connection. Nonetheless, evidence from Elias* suggests that the concept of a “Bible church” can be traced back to Chinese Christian communities in the United States:

In America, there weren't many Chinese Christians in each area, and everyone came from different backgrounds. If I had stayed in Taiwan, I might

²¹³ Vasilios* did not identify who they were in the interview. However, he was the only informant who specifically mentioned the “Bible Church Movement” in the US.

²¹⁴ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128.

²¹⁵ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128.

have never been able to leave my original denomination, my past. But when we came to North America, we had to let go of those things, for we only had small groups of God's children on campus. So everyone must, you might say, forget our differences and “huddle together for warmth”.²¹⁶

The image of individuals “huddling together for warmth” effectively symbolises the unifying nature of faith. This spirit of Biblical faith is further crystallised in the concise and deliberate “Declaration of Faith” found within GMBC's By-laws, comprising the four articles:

1. We believe that all 66 books in the Old and New Testaments of the Bible are inspired by God, completely reliable, and constitute the highest authority in our faith and life.
2. We believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth.
3. We believe in Jesus Christ, God's only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, was buried, and descended to the dead; who rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, is seated at the right hand of the Father, and will come to judge the living and the dead.
4. We believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy Christian Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.²¹⁷

Notably, article one elaborately emphasizes an unwavering belief in the entirety of Holy Scripture. This contrasts sharply with Articles 2-4 of this declaration, which notably condense the Apostles' Creed. This declaration clearly reflects how the founders utilized Biblical faith to legitimize the group's identity and leadership structure, while simultaneously revealing their tendency to prioritize “Biblical faith” over theological doctrines, even the creeds.

Leading by the Book: The First Generation Elders' Conviction and Legacy

Biblical faith not only served to legitimise GMBC's non-denominational identity but also to justify its lay leadership structure. They interpreted Scripture as presenting

²¹⁶ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

²¹⁷ Direct quotation from the 2021 English version of bylaws. The Chinese version remains the same in 2009, 2012, 2019 and this version. It is worth noting that the omission of "communion of saints" from Article 4 in earlier versions. The reason was unclear as the elders have variant interpretations.

“elder,” “pastor,” and “bishop” as interchangeable titles.²¹⁸ The first-generation elders, despite lacking formal Theological, embodied this “Bible-centric” ethos, considering Scripture the ultimate guide for all leadership practices. Elias* described the experience of being a leader within this context:

...So this formed a situation where leaders in the Bible church play an important role, that is, how to build this church according to God's will. If we go astray, it becomes our fault ... our fault ... so, the responsibility falls on the leaders. Everyone here (the elders) has to be diligent and have a spirit of research, not only about the simple meaning of the church in Scripture, but also in seeking Biblical guidance to help us make a decision when there is a practical issue. Therefore, because of this background, the GMBC... the leaders here may have more responsibilities than in a traditional church. Because in a traditional church, there are always people more experienced than you to follow up, so you can rely on it.²¹⁹

This demonstrates their acute awareness of the weighty responsibility inherent in their roles as elders, yet sincerely believed in Scripture as a divine resource for guiding the church's practices. As a university professor, Elias* even believed that “being diligent and having a spirit of research” allowed them to draw wisdom and guidance from the Bible to fulfil their responsibilities.²²⁰ Even during the interview, he remained convinced that studying the Bible leads to agreement within the leadership team.

So, we adopted the “Bible church” position in Hong Kong. If we have disagreements, we consult the Bible to solve them. This gives us all a chance to shed our past burdens. It emphasizes that the church is the body of Christ on earth, and together we build that body. This concept, that Christ is the head, and we are the members, becomes especially strong. The leader's role is important because there is no denominational backing; no one uses traditions to constrain you. They do not tell you what to do. They do not use finances to support or threaten you, telling you to comply. Isn't that right? There's a great degree of freedom. Freedom is good, but it also represents a great responsibility, so we need to be even more careful.²²¹

To my surprise, he unhesitatingly endorsed solving disagreements through Bible study, despite having personally experienced the turmoil of unresolved

²¹⁸ Interview-Gavriil*-20220811.

²¹⁹ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

²²⁰ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

²²¹ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

disagreements years ago. This suggests a deeply internalized belief that warrants closer examination. Notably, he directly links the concept of a “Bible church” to the image of “the body of Christ,” with Bible study serving as a sacred “shortcut” directly to Christ, the head. This implicitly positions denominations, with their “traditions,” hierarchical controls, and financial structures, as artificial constructs that “restrict freedom.” However, Elias* might be overlooking how this ingrained belief in “Bible study” could itself be a tradition inherited from his North American Bible study group experiences.

That said, the espoused “consulting the Bible to seek agreement” demonstrably shaped their leadership style, at least for a period, and the spirit of collective discernment through Bible study provided a theological legitimacy for GMBC's collective leadership model. Furthermore, this deeply ingrained Biblical faith, instilled through their teaching and example, became a legacy inherited by the second-generation elders, influencing their own understanding of leadership roles and responsibilities, as Gavriil*, a second-generation elder recalled:

Upon arriving at the church, I found that his (referring to Elias*) teaching was particularly engaging in terms of understanding the Bible. His sermons were captivating, making the scriptures clear and profoundly resonant for those of us who were new to the church and only had a superficial understanding of the Bible. Listening to his preaching was incredibly helpful in deepening my comprehension of the scriptures.²²²

This description aligns closely with that given by the second-generation elders, Stavros* and Kyriakos*. Both of them referred to how the first-generation elders inspired them in “using the word of God to shepherd the congregation”²²³ as well as the method for discerning potential elder candidates, emphasizing that “the impact of the Bible on their worldview and daily matters is essential.”²²⁴

In summary, the first-generation elders’ unwavering commitment to “Biblical Faith” not only shaped their own leadership but also wove this principle into the very fabric of GMBC. This legacy, likely inherited from Chinese Bible study groups in the US by

²²² Interview-Gavriil*-20220811.

²²³ Interview-Kyriakos*-20221008.

²²⁴ Interview-Kyriakos*-20221008.

the founders, has been transmitted across generations of GMBC leadership. While providing a seemingly unshakeable foundation and shared language for leadership, the unquestioned elevation of “Biblical Faith” also left some grey areas between the ideal and the reality.

The Unacknowledged Gaps Between Ideal and Practice

While upholding the Bible as the ultimate authority, the early leadership also acknowledged the difficulties and inconsistencies of the literal interpretation of the Scriptures. When confronted by these challenges, the Vasilios* adopted a “minimal” method of interpretation, aiming to “narrow, rather than broaden, the message”:

For instance, the method of baptism, sprinkling or immersion, is not an issue because the Bible does not explicitly prescribe one. The Lord's Supper is similar. The significance of the bread and cup is very minimal—basically, what Jesus and Paul literally said, though you can have your own deeper understanding.²²⁵

However, certain issues defy resolution, even with a minimalist approach. Elias* candidly revealed that the first generation of elders simply avoided certain contentious topics:

Of course, there are some controversial issues. We just haven't touched them, like the female elders or pastors; we haven't bothered to study it. We feel there's such a vast field for evangelism, saving souls is so important, and God has raised enough brothers in our church, right? We can keep bringing brothers forward, so it seems unnecessary to address this issue. We've just sidestepped these kinds of problems.²²⁶

For Elias*, the church's primary mission is the urgent evangelisation of unbelievers, allowing matters not directly related to this objective to be justifiably sidelined by the leadership.

This pragmatic approach, while perhaps effective in the short term, reveals a potential vulnerability within the leadership's model of “Biblical Faith.” By selectively engaging with Scripture and avoiding potentially divisive topics, they inadvertently created a precedent where personal preferences or expediency could overshadow

²²⁵ Interview-Vasilios*-20221128.

²²⁶ Interview-Elias*-20221108.

the espoused “ultimate solution” of the Bible.

Conversely, Marios* depicted a more realistic dynamic of how the leadership team at the time utilized the Bible in their decision-making processes:

To be honest, we don't follow the Bible to the letter like some fundamentalist groups do. It's not like that. We believe that any elder in church governance should be able to clearly understand God's will; that's what we need to do ... During our personal devotions, we also have many personal experiences of God's will for us. So, often, we do not just read the Bible verbatim. We usually have discussions. Discussion is about sharing with other elders what you have gained in your personal devotion to God. ²²⁷

This reliance on personal revelation and consensus-building, while presented as a way to discern God's will, further discloses the implicit influence of personal influence and subjective interpretation within a leadership model seemingly grounded in the objective authority of Scripture. This unacknowledged gap between the ideal of “Biblical Faith” and the pragmatic realities of leadership may pose latent challenges for the second generation as they navigate an increasingly complex church and societal landscape.

3.3.2 The Bible in Leadership Practice

This section examines the growing pains experienced by GMBC's second-generation leadership as they navigate the complexities of their inherited Bible-centric approach. While the Bible remains the ultimate authority for GMBC's leadership, applying its teachings has become increasingly fraught with challenges emerging alongside the church's practical realities. This section explores how differing interpretations of the Bible, intertwined with personal convictions and influences, complicate the pursuit of consensus and expose the limitations of a purely text-based approach to leadership. Furthermore, this section will discuss a recent, yet ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to supplement this Biblicistic approach with a more systematic theological framework, highlighting the deeply ingrained reliance on the Biblical faith and personal experience within the leadership team.

²²⁷ Interview-Marios*-20240312.

Divided by Interpretation: The Fragility of the Biblical Consensus

The inherent challenge of achieving agreement solely through biblical interpretation has become increasingly apparent to the second generation of elders. As previously noted, the turmoil experienced by some has shaken their faith in certain tenets inherited from the first generation, including the foundational consensus on the “collective leadership model”. The challenge mentioned in the previous chapter, where individuals with differing viewpoints can all find biblical references to support their respective stances, exemplifies the inherent difficulty of achieving consensus solely through Biblical interpretation.

In interviews, a majority of the second generation elders, such as Nasos*, Gavriil*, Stavros*, and Kyriakos*, expressed a concept similar to that of the first-generation elders, advocating for collective leadership as a clear biblical teaching.²²⁸ Nasos* mentioned:

The ideal leadership model is, of course, more level, meaning there are multiple people involved collectively, each with a focus that might differ slightly, but everyone is seen as equal in their relationships and in their hearts. This model might be less efficient, but its advantage, I believe, is that this is Biblical—it’s not about one person being singled out to play the role (of leader).²²⁹

Nasos*'s exegetical basis for collective leadership rests primarily on the plural form of the term “elder” in the New Testament. It is important to note his reasoning: while acknowledging the model's shortcomings in efficiency, he maintains that its “Biblical” basis makes it sacrosanct.

However, Neofytos*, another second-generation elder, presents a completely different view, also grounded in scripture: “When I study the Bible, particularly the early church, I find that God entrusted leadership to ONE leader, suggesting a ‘one leader’ model.”²³⁰

²²⁸ Interview-Nasos*-20221105, Interview-Gavriil*-20220811, Interview-Stavros*-20221010, Interview-Kyriakos*-20221008.

²²⁹ Interview-Nasos*-20221105.

²³⁰ Interview-Neofytos*-20220728.

Based on previous discussions, it is plausible that Neofytos*'s stance stems from his firsthand frustration with the inefficiencies of the collective leadership model and his admiration for a “dictator-like” pastor from a Singaporean church he once attended. However, if he were to emphasise the Scripture in a similar way of Nasos*, for instance, the Old Testament examples of God appointing individual kings or judges for the Israelites, it would likely lead to an impasse in the discussion (although this specific conversation has not occurred in reality).

Beyond the Text: The Persistent Influence of Personal Authority

Adding further complexity is the undeniable influence of personal authority, which often overshadows the proclaimed “ultimate authority” of the Bible.

The first example still comes from Neofytos*. In our interview conducted in Chinese, he frequently used the term “Biblical,” almost always in English, which struck me as significant. In his narrative, the term seemed to signify certain positive attributes, often used to describe individuals as “a Biblical person” or “a Biblical elder.” However, its precise meaning remained unclear. So, I asked him directly for clarification, leading to the following conversation:

I: What do you think a “Biblical” elder should be like, in your opinion?

Neofytos*: ...Live a holy life. This, this... I mean, of course. You could mention many scriptures, like the First and Second Timothy, they all contain these adjectives, and every adjective, you can interpret what it means to be above reproach? Right, you can have a “high view” of it or a minimal of it ... Yes, it is up to this ...

I: I'd like to hear your own understanding.

Neofytos*: I... I think, in my heart, a person with a living testimony who I've seen is Vasilios*, Vasilios*, or Rev. T, within my reach. I feel that they have this kind of... I'm not saying others don't have life. That's not what I mean. The risk of choosing a sample is the opposite, isn't it? That is to say, they are in my mind more perfect examples, oh... But I also know they're not perfect before God, I know, I know it's not about being nitpicky, in my mind they represent a more adequate image of what it means to be Biblical.

I: But these three people are actually quite different from each other. Don't you think? However, what aspects do you think are the same in your mind, these three, their personalities, the ways they are, they are actually quite

different.

Neofytos*: Holiness. I think if you want me to use one word... it's holiness or maybe loving... or... I mean, of course, the Bible has all sorts of ways we should be, but if you have to summarise it. It's like Jesus said, love God and love people. God says 'I'm holy, you are holy, you have to be holy.' So, actually, these two themes are more prominent. Of course, there are many others, but I feel they exhibit a balanced display of Holiness and Loving in my eyes. Of course, I wouldn't dare say I know every aspect of their lives. We definitely don't, but from what I can see, they show a balance of Holiness and Loving.

I: How is the holiness exhibited?

Neofytos*: When you are with Vasilios*, you'll know his sense of right and wrong is very clear. He's very aware of what's right and what's wrong. I believe he does what's right and what's wrong. He's very principled, of course, and I believe his principles are Biblical principles. I think Rev. T is the same. He dares to open up his life; he has no dark areas. He lives a holy life, a Biblical life. His views on things, when he voices his opinion, you know his values. His love for his wife, his insights into children, his love for the congregation. His maturity, spiritual maturity, his patience, I think, is right. For me, these are very good aspects, you understand. Rev. T for me as well, when he guides me as a pastor, in shepherding me, from the perspective of him shepherding me, I can see his values, his attitude towards things, his "black and white". Like when he talked to us about apologising to his daughter for a small thing that offended her in the past. He cried a lot afterward... he was very regretful. These qualities just show that he is a Godly person.²³¹

During our dialogue above, it is not hard to feel that Neofytos* is trying his best to describe his ideal image of a "Biblical elder" using various concepts or attributes, yet he struggles to fully express his inner feelings. His descriptions shift from abstract grand concepts to narrative details about the personal lives of specific persons (Vasilios*). When pressed, he anchors his understanding of what is Biblical in the image of a "Godly person" rather than adherence to certain principles from the Biblical text.

Neofytos*'s struggle to define a "Biblical elder" exemplifies this tension. While he initially frames his understanding in terms of scriptural references, he ultimately anchors his definition in the lived examples of admired individuals like Vasilios*. This suggests that while Scripture provides an authoritative framework, the embodiment

²³¹ Interview-Neofytos*-20220728.

of “Biblical” qualities within specific persons holds greater weight in shaping understanding and practice. This example affirms the previous chapter's observation about the importance placed on role modelling and personal influence by the first-generation elders. While this raises valid concerns about the potential for subjective bias and implicit power imbalances, it also personalized the abstract and lofty authority of the Bible, imbuing faith with a more human dimension.

Another example further illuminates the interplay between biblical authority and personal authority. Pantelis*, another second-generation elder, revealed that before accepting the elder nomination, he grappled with the requirement of being “the husband of one wife” (1 Timothy 3:12) due to past relationships. He hesitated, seeking answers from scripture:

...At that time, I consulted numerous sources, various Bible teachers, and their interpretations of this passage. John MacArthur's explanation, which was very rigid and strict, presented a significant obstacle for me. I felt quite stuck. However, when I shared my dilemma with my mentor, he surprised me by saying, 'That interpretation by John MacArthur is not Biblical at all!' I was shocked. I held both figures in high regard, recognizing them as giants in their fields, yet they held differing views. My mentor directly labelling MacArthur's interpretation as unbiblical was surprising but also... broadened my perspective.²³²

Ultimately, Pantelis* chose to follow his mentor's viewpoint and eventually became an elder in GMBC, prioritizing the counsel of someone who knew him personally and cared for him over the stance of a renowned Bible interpreter like John MacArthur, despite also holding him in high esteem. This decision highlights the profound influence of personal relationships and trust, particularly when they challenge established beliefs.

These examples expose a nuanced reality within GMBC's leadership: while “Biblical Faith” is upheld as authoritative, the interpretation and application of Scripture are inevitably shaped by personal experience, relationships, and individual understandings of “Godly” leadership. In this context, a distinction must be drawn between two forms of influence. “Biblical authority” refers to the leaders' espoused

²³² Interview-Pantelis*-20220727.

belief in Scripture as the ultimate, objective source of truth. In contrast, "personal authority" denotes the influence wielded by respected individuals through their lived example and relational trust. The blurring of these lines occurs when, for instance, a leader's personal authority is validated by describing them as a "Biblical person," effectively collapsing the distinction between the authority of the text and the authority of the person. While this dynamic interplay can lead to inconsistencies, it also suggests a positive implication: the Bible, in the lived experience of leadership, may not function as the absolute, rigid authority that leaders themselves proclaim. This allows for the possibility of renewed understanding and growth through the interaction of individuals, Scripture, and lived experience.

A Premature Attempt to Introduce the Formal Theology

Confronted by the limitations of a solely Biblicistic approach to leadership, particularly in navigating disagreements, Nasos* attempted to introduce a more systematic theological framework through the works of Tim Keller. Recognizing that the Bible does not offer explicit solutions for every situation, Nasos* acknowledges the potential for diverse interpretations and the need for contextualized judgement. As he notes,

Different groups face different situations and may respond differently. Not all responses are explicitly outlined in the Bible; perhaps options A, B, and C are all within the realm of truth, but a group may not be able to choose all three simultaneously. It's not about right or wrong, but rather judgments based on specific contexts. I believe this presents a significant challenge when disagreements arise. Therefore, it will be crucial for elders to reach a consensus before such issues emerge.²³³

Nasos* aims to situate GMBC within the broader theological framework of the universal Church. Utilizing his storytelling abilities, Nasos* sought to redefine GMBC's identity during a retreat for all church co-workers. He began by outlining GMBC's "current situation," characterized by both internal generational shifts and external societal transformations. Nasos* identified the church's weaknesses as a lack of a cohesive and well-defined theological stance (owing to its non-denominational structure) and the absence of systematic theological training and vision amongst its staff. He emphasized challenges such as the lack of a

²³³ Interview-Nasos*-20221105.

comprehensive pastoral theology and defined service principles, coupled with insufficiently detailed and targeted teaching and pastoral care for congregants. Subsequently, he endeavors to portray the current GMBC as:²³⁴

- **Our “denomination”:** (non-denominational) Protestantism.
- **Our 'stream”:** (rational, conservative, non-liturgical, non-charismatic) Evangelicalism
- **Our “traditions”:**
 - Campus Evangelism (Revivalism);
 - Upholding the Bible (Fundamentalism);
 - Chinese house church movement (Pietism);
 - Leading by elders & emphasis on rationality (Reformed).

Notably, existing literature and interviews lack any mention of a connection between GMBC and the Reformed tradition. This “forced” linkage resembles Vasilios*'s association of GMBC with the North American Bible Church Movement. This suggests that Nasos* may have intentionally minimised the influence of the independent church movement, choosing instead to position the Reformed tradition as a bridge and introduce Tim Keller as a potential solution. Nasos* seemingly believed that Keller's model could be harmonised with GMBC, and evidence suggests he had already begun subtly integrating aspects of it, particularly “gospel-centred” theology, into the church, as reflected in the second iteration of GMBC's Mission Statement.²³⁵

However, Nasos*'s efforts to promote Keller's work faced obstacles. Keller's complex theological framework proved difficult for lay elders to digest amidst their busy lives. Consequently, despite Nasos*'s initial efforts, Keller's influence within the community appears to have diminished. While some of Keller's quotes still surface in sermons, the emphasis on the “gospel” has largely reverted to earlier language focused on

²³⁴ Nasos*, “Church History: Where Are We?” Sunday School PPT, May 29th, 2022.

²³⁵ “The Mission Statement” published in Oct, 2016: “Our lives are to be renewed by the Gospel, Establish life-transforming churches in Hong Kong and other cities, Be a blessing to urban churches in China.” This statement, reflecting Tim Keller's distinctive emphasis on the Gospel and urban church planting, simultaneously maintains a focus on mission work in China. However, Keller's name is not explicitly indicated.

conversion. This experience probably highlights the difficulty of directly imposing a formal theological framework onto a community accustomed to a more Biblicistic and experiential approach.

3.3.3 Authority and Images: Two Approaches to Scripture

The preceding sections have demonstrated how elders within the Church frequently employ the Bible as a sacred authority, legitimizing established leadership structures and practices. However, a closer examination of how the Bible “really works” in the lived experience of the elders reveals a more nuanced and dynamic interplay between text and context. This section, drawing upon interview data, proposes two distinct yet interconnected approaches—the Bible as a symbol of authority and as a source of theological imagery—employed by the GMBC elders. This insight offers a deeper understanding of the relationship between Biblical faith and GMBC leadership. The two approaches are identified in below:

First, the Bible as a symbol of authority. This approach, prevalent in both generations, utilizes the Bible as a monolithic entity, often abstractly, to legitimize decisions and practices. Invoking terms like “Biblical” or “fitting the Bible” serves to align leadership with a divinely ordained standard, reinforcing its legitimacy within the community.

These approaches are evident in several previously mentioned cases. For instance, in legitimizing the “Bible Church” Model, Vasilios* explained that embracing this identity fostered unity within a diverse congregation by emphasizing shared Scripture over potentially divisive denominational traditions. Furthermore, in justifying collective leadership, Nasos*’s assertion that this model, despite its limitations, is “Biblical” demonstrates how appeals to Scripture can settle debates by invoking a seemingly unquestionable source. Lastly, Neofytos*’s description of a “Biblical elder” warrants further examination. Rather than constructing a paradigm of eldership solely from scriptural passages, he utilizes “Biblical” as a modifier pointing to divine authority, thereby elevating and commending Vasilios*’s personal example. In this context, “Biblical” becomes synonymous with terms like “Godly,” “virtuous,” or “ideal.”

Second, the Bible as a Source of metaphorical images. This approach, less consciously employed but equally significant, delves into the narratives, metaphors, and imagery within Scripture. These images provide a framework for understanding leadership experiences, shaping emotional responses, and inspiring action.

As illustrations, the previously mentioned examples of “King Saul” and “Soldiers of Christ” exemplify typical Biblical images. In the narratives of the respective interviewees (Marios*, Elias*), these images not only serve as illustrations to clarify or support their viewpoints but also convey strong emotional weight. The tragic downfall of King Saul serves as a solemn warning against the abuse of leadership, while “Soldiers of Christ” evokes powerful emotions, whether it be the fervent zeal of Nasos* in his early years or the enduring aversion of Pantelis*.

It is important to note that the use of Biblical images can be nuanced and carry layers of meaning beyond their immediate application. For instance, in his interview, Kyriakos* reflects on how, as the “youngest elder,” he drew strength from Scripture to overcome feelings of inadequacy because of the young age. He cites 1 Timothy 4:12, “Do not let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith and in purity,” and explains:

Well, yes, um, after that, I remember, uh, it was a Bible verse that repeatedly, repeatedly impacted me, which was not to let anyone look down on you because you are young. Right, it's that passage that I feel has always, always been encouraging me. I feel that God, through such scripture and through the seniors around me, has been encouraging me.²³⁶

At first glance, this verse appears to present a propositional teaching or a command (“Do not let ... but set ...”) with a remarkably high standard. Intuitively, such a demanding expectation might seem at odds with Kyriakos*'s perceived inadequacy. However, instead of feeling pressured by scriptural authority, he experiences empowerment. This is because, rather than simply extracting a rule from the verse, Kyriakos* draws strength and guidance by placing himself within the scene of Timothy in the early church. He views Timothy as a personal image, reflecting his

²³⁶ Interview-Kyriakos*-20221008.

own situation within the broader Biblical narrative. Notably, Kyriakos* connects the verse to his relationship with senior elders, suggesting that the Timothy-Paul dynamic resonates with his experience of intergenerational mentorship and leadership development within GMBC. This case highlights how Biblical images can operate beyond conscious thought, shaping perspectives and empowering action through relatable narratives and archetypal figures.

Notably, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. In fact, trust in the Bible's symbolic authority often motivates these leaders to meditate on and connect with biblical images, believing that doing so grants them authoritative guidance. However, overemphasize this symbolic authority, while fostering stability and shared identity, can lead to rigidity, stifle critical thinking, and obscure the influence of personal biases. Conversely, overreliance on a single Biblical image to interpret reality risks oversimplification, bias, and even emotional manipulation.

It is also worth noting that the prevalent use of “Bible principles” or “Biblical principles” within North American and Chinese evangelical Christianity often aligns more closely with the “Symbol of Authority” approach. This stems from the emphasis on normativity and objectivity inherent in this phrasing, as “Biblical principles” are frequently presented as fixed, universally applicable rules derived from Scripture. This emphasis on codification aligns with the use of the Bible as a source of absolute authority, aiming to establish clear boundaries and guidelines for behaviour. While specific verses may be cited to support these principles, and even “images” may be employed in their interpretation, the focus often remains on extracting generalizable precepts and providing authoritative justification, rather than engaging with the broader context or nuances of the passage. Nasos* and Neofytos*'s aforementioned debate surrounding the “Biblical” basis of GMBC's collective leadership exemplifies this tendency.

Overall Patterns in the Data and Its Implications

Analysis of the interview data reveals a striking pattern: while all informants

referenced the Bible or used the term “Biblical” multiple times,²³⁷ less than half directly mentioned “Biblical principles.”²³⁸ Those who did predominantly focused on 1 Timothy 3, highlighting a tendency to extract leadership qualifications from Scripture. Moreover, the data reveals that all informants, often unconsciously, employed “Biblical images” in their narratives.²³⁹

These patterns offer important insights. Firstly, the frequent appearance of the terms “Bible” or “Biblical” suggests a strong correlation between this symbolic authority and the elders' understanding of church leadership and their personal faith. Secondly, in sharp contrast, their use of Biblical principles is less frequent and more fragmented, indicating that this “codified theology,” endorsed by Biblical authority, does not hold as much sway. Conversely, “Biblical images” are employed widely, though often unconsciously. This suggests that the “Biblical images” approach, while less explicit, may be more deeply embedded in their lived experience of faith and leadership, functioning as an underlying grammar that shapes their worldview and actions.

The prevalence of “Biblical images” might indicate a stronger reliance on a lived, experiential theology rather than a strictly codified, principle-based approach. This could reflect the influence of the Chinese cultural context, which often emphasizes lived experience and relational dynamics over abstract principles. Recognizing and nurturing this “lived theology,” emerging from the elders' engagement with Biblical images, holds significant potential for addressing GMBC's evolving needs. By fostering spaces for reflection, dialogue, and creative interpretation, leadership can move beyond using the Bible solely for legitimation. Instead, they can tap into its transformative power to navigate complexities, embrace vulnerability, and cultivate a more authentic and vibrant community.

²³⁷ All the interviews in this study.

²³⁸ The use of the exact term “Biblical principles” or “principles in the Bible” are only seen in Interview-Neofytos*-20220728, Interview-Nasos*-20221105. While not directly employing the term “Biblical principles”, Vasilios* draws upon scriptural references as principles.

²³⁹ All the interviews in this study.

Chapter 4. Beyond the Home: Reimagining Belonging in a Chinese Diaspora Church

The "home" image, carefully cultivated by GMBC's founding leaders, resonated deeply with the initial congregation. Primarily composed of Mandarin-speaking individuals navigating the uncertainties of Hong Kong, they sought community amidst a sense of displacement. This image, strategically woven into the church's narrative through sermons, publications, and personal testimonies, offered a powerful counter-narrative to the prevalent "drifter" experience. It promised stability, belonging, and a shared linguistic and cultural space. The founding leaders skillfully leveraged the unifying power of Mandarin, transforming it from a potential barrier into a cornerstone of GMBC's identity. Furthermore, they emphasized the importance of family, offering tangible representations of the "home" ideal through the warmth, guidance, and support provided by their own families.

However, the "home" image, while initially successful, faced significant challenges. The forced sale of the church property in 2013 deeply disrupted not only the physical but also symbolic foundations of this image. This event cast the congregation back into a state of "drifting" and forced a reevaluation of "home" as a concept. This disruption exposed the fragility of a locationally defined "home" and highlighted the limitations of a static identity in a constantly changing world. Furthermore, the generational transition within GMBC revealed evolving understandings of belonging and leadership. Influenced by their experiences in North American Chinese churches, the founding generation prioritized evangelism and outreach to mainland China. This prioritization promoted a particular model of family and a leadership style characterized by a degree of detachment from the local Hong Kong community. Conversely, the second generation, particularly as represented by Nasos*, emphasized belonging within the church community itself. This shift suggests a more fluid and inclusive understanding of identity, transcending strict cultural or linguistic boundaries. While both generations aimed to build community, a clear conflict arose: outreach to mainland China, given the complex political and social dynamics between Hong Kong and the mainland, could be perceived as a detachment from the local context the second generation valued.

This chapter delves into the "Home" metaphor, a central yet contested metaphorical image within GMBC's lived theology. This analysis argues that "Home" is not merely a linguistic device but a powerful image with profound theological significance, shaping how leaders and congregants understand belonging, identity, and mission in a diaspora context. To unpack this, the analysis first situates GMBC's experience within the broader context of existing ethnographic studies on Chinese Christian communities. Subsequently, the chapter will probe the theological potential and limitations of the "Home" metaphor itself. This will be achieved by examining the image through the dual lenses of Christian theology and Chinese philosophy, ultimately seeking a more dynamic and expansive vision of belonging for the diaspora church.

4.1 Constructing "Home": A Foundational Metaphor for a Church Community

Drawing on sociological and ethnographic studies of diaspora, this section examines the complexities of the "home" metaphor within GMBC. By focusing on the lived experiences of this particular community, this analysis contributes to broader theoretical discussions of identity formation and the negotiation of tradition and change within diaspora contexts. It first examines how this image has been constructed and experienced within North American Chinese churches. Building on these insights, the analysis then turns to the specific case of GMBC, exploring how the "home" metaphor was shaped by the unique context of Hong Kong and the experiences of its first-generation leaders. This comparative approach reveals both continuities and discontinuities, highlighting distinctive features of GMBC while also providing a broader context for understanding its internal dynamics. Finally, I explore the challenges and opportunities presented by generational transition at GMBC, drawing on the "Silent Exodus" phenomenon and the concept of "cultural rigidity" to analyze the tensions between a static "home" and the evolving needs of the second generation. This multi-layered analysis sets the stage for a deeper theological reflection on the "home" in the subsequent section, which aims to move beyond

static boundaries towards a more dynamic and expansive vision of belonging within diaspora churches.

4.1.1 The Initial Appeal of "Home": Language, Family, and Stability in the Diaspora

This comparative approach provides a valuable lens for examining GMBC, particularly given its inheritance of the North American Chinese church legacy during its founding. Moreover, these patterns, reminiscent of those observed in other overseas Chinese churches, reflect the community's initial embrace of a diasporic identity grounded in their own self-definition and narrative (an *emic* perspective), suggesting that the initial "home" metaphor arose organically from within the community, reflecting their own understanding of their needs and experiences. However, using this comparative framework also allows for highlighting the unique aspects of GMBC's "home" within the specific context of Hong Kong.

The analysis will focus on four key aspects of the "home" image, as identified in section 3.1.2, that is, "language as identity unifier", "families as embodiment of the image", "place of stability", and "leadership as the backbone". By examining how these elements are utilized and understood in both contexts, this section will reveal two key patterns that distinguish GMBC: the heightened significance of physical space and the first generation's resistance to embodying the "father figure" leadership model.

Language and families: shared strategies for belonging

Both GMBC and North American Chinese churches utilize shared language and the cultivation of family-like bonds as key strategies for creating a sense of belonging within the diaspora. The Mandarin language, while initially a potential barrier for newcomers to Hong Kong, became a cornerstone of GMBC's identity, fostering connection among individuals from diverse backgrounds and enabling targeted evangelism. This aligns with Yang Fenggang's observations on the strong correlation between language (including Mandarin and Cantonese) and group identity within

church communities, though his research does not explicitly identify language as an evangelistic strategy.²⁴⁰ Erika Muse highlights how pastors employ specific linguistic cues to reinforce shared values and create a sense of familiarity.²⁴¹ Zhang Xuefeng's work further reinforces this emphasis, observing both Chinese churches and parachurch organizations utilizing Mandarin to attract and engage with Chinese immigrants.²⁴²

Beyond shared language,²⁴³ both GMBC and North American Chinese churches emphasize the creation of family-like bonds within the church community. Zhang observes a close relationship between evangelistic efforts and familial values, as exemplified by the lives of church leaders and their families.²⁴⁴ This dynamic, extending from personal homes to church events, provides examples for Christian living, shaping younger generations' perceptions of faith and leadership. This convergence on shared language and familial bonds underscores the importance of creating a sense of familiarity and belonging for individuals navigating the challenges of diaspora life.

Furthermore, a critical analysis reveals the deeply gendered nature of the "Home" metaphor. The ethnographic data demonstrates that the stability and warmth of the idealized family at GMBC rely on a traditional division of labor. Women, particularly the wives of leaders, function as primary nurturers and facilitators, providing hospitality, managing the domestic sphere, and offering the supportive partnership that enables male leaders to fulfill their public and spiritual duties. Notably, GMBC has historically employed several female salaried staff, including ministers like myself, as well as directors of children's ministry and administrative staff. However,

²⁴⁰ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 101-3.

²⁴¹ Muse, *The Evangelical Church in Boston's Chinatown*, 77-88.

²⁴² Xuefeng Zhang, "How Religious Organizations Influence Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Protestantism in the United States," *Sociology of Religion* 67, no. 2 (2006): 149-59.

²⁴³ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 8-9, 39. Yang specifically describes the Chinese language as a "special position in the symbolic system" (*ibid.*, 49) and how a disagreement over language (whether to hire a youth pastor who spoke only English and no Mandarin) led to a bitter split within the church community he studied (*ibid.*, 102-3).

²⁴⁴ Zhang, "How Religious Organizations Influence Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Protestantism in the United States," 150-52.

the congregation appears to expect these women to focus primarily on administrative support and pastoral care (their self-professed culinary skills, for example, seem particularly valued). These discrepancies do not appear to stem from a conscious effort by male leaders to diminish women's roles, but rather from the very construction of the "Home" image, which is predicated on an implicit, and often unacknowledged, gendered structure.²⁴⁵ Elias*'s expectation that the "whole family" serve as a role model reinforces this structure, placing a significant, albeit often invisible, burden on the spouses of leaders. Therefore, the "Home" is not a gender-neutral space; its theological significance is built upon specific assumptions about male and female roles within the Christian family.

Place: a distinctive emphasis in GMBC

While shared language and familial bonds are common strategies for fostering belonging in both GMBC and North American Chinese churches, the GMBC case reveals a distinctive emphasis on the importance of physical space. Securing a permanent location for the church became a paramount concern for the first-generation leaders, reflecting the unique context of Hong Kong and its impact on the congregation's sense of identity.

This emphasis on place contrasts with the observations of Yang Fenggang, Erika Muse, and Cao Nanlai in their studies of North American Chinese churches. While these scholars acknowledge the church as a gathering place, they do not explicitly link physical space to group survival and identity as prominently as the GMBC data demonstrates. Yang does offer the observation that:

[A] church is first of all a religious organization, the sacred place for Christian believers to conduct religious rituals and activities, express religious feelings and ideas, and collectively create and maintain a religious meaning system.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁵ These nuances regarding gender are based on my daily observations and participatory experience at GMBC. However, as I will address in the limitations section of the concluding chapter, the dynamics of gender warrant a dedicated, rigorous study based on focused qualitative data. This study, which examines the visible male leadership within a Chinese church, can serve as a foundation for future research exploring the nuanced significance of women's roles within this context.

²⁴⁶ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 57.

However, in his further explorations, he does not continue to address the relationship between these religious elements and physical "place." Yang mentions Chinese congregants prioritizing large houses for fellowship gatherings,²⁴⁷ but these observations are anecdotal rather than a systematic analysis of the relationship between place and identity. Zhang's work, while implicitly recognizing the importance of a physical gathering place through the resources dedicated to maintaining church and parachurch facilities,²⁴⁸ also does not explore this aspect in depth.

The heightened significance of physical space in GMBC likely stems from the unique context of Hong Kong, a densely populated city characterized by transience and extraordinarily high property prices. According to various reports, Hong Kong ranks among the most expensive real estate markets globally. This scarcity of affordable space has profound social consequences, which links cramped living conditions to increased stress and declining mental health.²⁴⁹ This severe spatial constraint also impacts religious organizations.²⁵⁰ Local churches, for instance, often resort to establishing themselves in commercial buildings or residential high-rises, leading to the phenomenon of "second-floor churches." These spaces, while functional, are often characterized by limited size, ambient noise, and a lack of visibility, making it challenging to cultivate a distinct religious atmosphere.²⁵¹

For a congregation largely composed of "Hong Kong drifters," securing a permanent location offered a tangible anchor of stability and belonging in a constantly shifting environment. The acquisition of their own building, despite financial risks and internal

²⁴⁷ Ibid, 109,

²⁴⁸ Zhang, "How Religious Organizations Influence Chinese Conversion to Evangelical Protestantism in the United States," 152-3.

²⁴⁹ For instance, "Hong Kong's Public Space Problem," BBC, August 31, 2020, accessed September 20, 2023, <https://www.bbc.com/worklife/article/20200831-hong-kong-public-space-problem-social-distance>. See also Wai-Ben Wong, *Church. Space. Transformation: 24 Creative Practices of Mission Space* (Hong Kong: Inpress, 2022), 26-35.

²⁵⁰ Hok-on Lui 呂焯安, "香港小型教會發展初探" (Xianggang xiaoxing jiaohui fazhan chutan) [A Preliminary Study on the Development of Small Churches in Hong Kong], *Pastoral Journal (Alliance Bible Seminary)* 15 (November 2003): 3-56.

²⁵¹ Editorial: Church Architecture and Reflections on Hong Kong's Current Situation (Issue 1341), "Church Architecture and Reflections on Hong Kong's Current Situation", *Christian Times*, May 10, 2013.

disagreements, became a symbol of the leadership's commitment to providing a secure and lasting "home" for the community. This emphasis on place, deeply intertwined with leadership legitimacy and congregational well-being, reflects the specific challenges and anxieties faced by a church seeking to establish its identity in a transient urban landscape.

Leadership: resisting the paternal figure

While the "home" metaphor often evokes images of familial warmth and paternal care, the GMBC case reveals a more complex relationship with leadership, particularly regarding the first-generation elders' conscious rejection of the "father figure" model prevalent in many North American Chinese churches.

This paternalistic leadership style, characterized by a centralized authority figure who embodies both spiritual and familial authority, is a common feature observed in studies of North American Chinese churches. Cao describes how senior pastors often assume a fatherly role, providing guidance, support, and discipline for the congregation, mirroring traditional Chinese family structures.²⁵² As Cao observes, this family-like model, while beneficial for at-risk youth by providing stability and belonging in a new cultural landscape, also presents the potential for replicating traditional hierarchical power dynamics and may discourage dissent or independent thought, given its emphasis on the pastor's paternal role and its contrast with more democratic church structures.

The GMBC founders, drawing on their own experiences within North American Chinese Christian communities, expressed concerns about the potential for abuse stemming from this centralized authority. They feared replicating what they described as a "King Saul" scenario, where a charismatic leader's unchecked power could lead to spiritual and emotional harm. This apprehension, particularly regarding hierarchical abuse and power imbalances, fueled their decision to reject the senior pastor model and adopt a more collaborative leadership structure.

²⁵² Cao, "The Church as a Surrogate Family for Working Class Immigrant Chinese Youth," 191-93.

However, this rejection created its own set of challenges. The first-generation elders, despite their intentions, still benefited from the implicit authority associated with their experience, social capital, and role in establishing the church. Their resistance to fully embodying the "father figure," coupled with the congregation's expectations of paternal leadership, created an unresolved tension. This tension, along with the challenges of navigating leadership transitions and adapting to evolving congregational needs, highlights the need for more nuanced understandings of leadership within diaspora churches, ones that balance authority with accountability, tradition with innovation, and the desire for stability with the need for adaptability.

4.1.2 Place and Paternalism: Understanding the Tensions

While the image of a harmonious, multi-generational "family" frequently emerges in studies of diaspora Chinese churches, the reality at GMBC, as in many other such communities, reveals a more complex picture. Existing research, while highlighting the prevalence of intergenerational conflicts and the "Silent Exodus" of younger generations,²⁵³ often falls short in capturing the nuanced perspectives and emotional complexities of this transition. The GMBC data, with its focus on the lived experiences of both first- and second-generation leaders, offers a valuable opportunity to delve deeper into these dynamics, revealing not only the fragility of the "home" metaphor but also the limitations of existing frameworks in addressing the multifaceted challenges of generational change. This section will analyze how cultural differences, leadership styles, and the search for identity contribute to tensions within GMBC, ultimately highlighting the need for a more expansive and dynamic understanding of belonging that moves beyond static notions of "home" and embraces the complexities of shared navigation.

²⁵³ The term was initially employed by Helen Lee, "Silent Exodus: Can the East Asian Church in America Reverse the Flight of Its Next Generation?" *Christianity Today* 40, no. 12 (1996): 50. Drawing upon empirical data, Todd further examines this phenomenon, engaging in both sociological investigation and theological reflection. See Matthew Todd, "Retaining the Next Generation in Chinese Diaspora Churches: A Theological Approach to Doing Mission (A Canadian Example)," *Practical Theology* 9, no. 4 (2016): 351–64, accessed April 28, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1756073X.2016.1146832>.

The fragile "families": intergenerational tensions and defensive responses

Navigating the intersection of multiple, sometimes conflicting, identities creates numerous layers of conflict, as observed by Yang in his ethnographic study of Chinese American Christians.²⁵⁴ While the specific cultural context differs from Yang's American example, the underlying dynamic of negotiating these multiple identities offers insights into GMBC, particularly as members navigate their relationships with mainland China, Hong Kong, and the church community. Clashes between differing cultural values, communication styles, and expectations regarding religious practice contribute to a sense of fragility within the community structure, particularly manifesting as intergenerational tensions. This fragility is further echoed in Helen Lee's and Matthew Todd's research on the "Silent Exodus" from Asian diaspora churches, where younger generations, feeling alienated, quietly leave to seek more resonant communities.

Todd attributes the issue to two primary factors: "the church's inadequate accommodation of cultural diversity and inclusivity", and its "cultural rigidity", characterized by an overemphasis on Chinese culture.²⁵⁵ Unfortunately, Todd's analysis does not further explore the underlying causes of these factors, particularly the emotional dimensions involved. However, Yang's perspective offers a more nuanced understanding of the pervasive issues within Chinese diaspora churches highlighted by Todd, namely, the anxieties experienced by the first generation and the struggles faced by the second.

First, Yang shows that the different levels of acculturation and assimilation between immigrant parents and their American-born children contribute significantly to intergenerational conflicts.²⁵⁶ This gap affects communication styles, values, expectations, and interpretations of cultural and religious norms, leading to clashes

²⁵⁴ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 182.

²⁵⁵ Todd, "Retaining the Next Generation in Chinese Diaspora Churches," 360.

²⁵⁶ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 25-26, 178-79, 181-82.

between Chinese and American values.²⁵⁷ Such differences may create distinct “in-group/out-group” dynamics within the church, which means those who adhere more closely to traditional Chinese values might view those who embrace American values as a threat to the “cultural integrity” of the community, leading to a more rigid enforcement of cultural norms.

Second, such tensions, especially regarding assimilation vs. cultural preservation, can heighten anxieties about the loss of Chinese identity. This perceived threat can lead to a defensive posture, where maintaining cultural distinctiveness becomes paramount, even if it means alienating younger generations who are navigating more fluid cultural identities. All these factors potentially create a climate of instability and uncertainty, where maintaining cultural boundaries becomes a way of preserving a sense of identity and control in a rapidly changing context. This coping mechanism, while understandable, can lead to the very “cultural rigidity” that Todd observes, ultimately pushing away younger generations who seek a more inclusive and adaptable church experience.

While the context of GMBC differs, with “two generations” representing two groups of migrants from different places, it echoes these broader trends. Although cultural assimilation issues exist, they are less pronounced than in North American churches where generational differences are compounded by cultural and linguistic divides. However, the leadership's strong emotional response to the perceived “loss of home” in GMBC reveals a similar fragility. This perceived loss, stemming from both internal cultural differences and external relocation pressures, disrupts their sense of stability and identity as providers of a safe haven, and thus triggers defensive responses. The data reveals a strong emotional response from GMBC's leadership regarding the perceived “loss of home.” This reaction highlights how deeply intertwined the “home” image is with the leaders' sense of self, making its disruption a direct threat to their identities. The perceived loss of ‘home,’ coupled with the pressures of relocation and cultural differences, threatened the first generation's leadership and triggered defensive responses. Elias*'s shift to a “military camp” (3.1.3) metaphor,

²⁵⁷ Ibid., 25-26.

framing the city as a battlefield, reveals a defensive response to the loss of their physical space and the perceived threat to the church's identity. This combative imagery contrasts sharply with the earlier emphasis on belonging and potentially alienates younger generations more integrated into Hong Kong society.

This convergence on defensive mechanisms, both in the broader trends observed by scholars and the specific responses within GMBC, highlights a critical challenge: the desire to preserve a static "home" amidst internal and external pressures leads to rigid boundaries and resistance to adaptation. This ultimately deepens generational divides, unraveling the "family" fabric they strive to maintain.

Language, leadership, and the search for self-preservation

While the shared language of Mandarin initially served as a powerful unifying force for GMBC, attracting "Hong Kong drifters" seeking a sense of belonging in a Cantonese-dominant environment, the data reveals a more complex reality. As the church navigated generational transitions, language evolved from a source of unity to a potential barrier, highlighting the limitations of a solely linguistic approach to constructing identity and belonging.

This linguistic pattern resonates with studies of broader Chinese diaspora Christian communities. It not only presents a barrier to intergenerational communication but also leads to leadership issues. Todd observes a "parent-child" dynamic between the Chinese-speaking and English-speaking congregations in various Chinese bicultural churches. The English congregation, typically composed of younger, second-generation members, operates under the authority and control of the established Chinese congregation, hindering its growth and autonomy.²⁵⁸ Todd argues that this power imbalance suppresses the younger generations' impetus for embracing diversity.

²⁵⁸ Todd, "Retaining the Next Generation in Chinese Diaspora Churches," 352.

Michael Chu's research on intergenerational conflicts within an Australian Chinese church highlights the pivotal role of language proficiency.²⁵⁹ Chu observed that younger generations struggle to comprehend the reactions of older leaders to intergenerational tensions, such as suspicion and withdrawal from communication, despite these leaders' professed dedication to faith and reverence for God. Through further interviews, Chu found that the older generation's lack of English proficiency could lead to a sense of inferiority, hindering their motivation to learn a second language. This, in turn, exacerbated cultural misunderstandings and particularly hampered communication with English-speaking leaders considered "lower" in the church hierarchy. Vasilios*'s experience, while occurring in a Mandarin-speaking context within a Cantonese-dominant city, mirrors the power dynamics described by Todd and Chu. Like the English-speaking congregations in Todd's study, Vasilios* faced a challenge to his leadership from a figure representing the dominant language group. This suggests that language, regardless of the specific languages involved, can become a marker of power and a source of intergenerational tension within diaspora churches.

Interestingly, despite the vastly different contexts, the dynamics highlighted in the study by Todd resonate within GMBC. As the data reveals, Vasilios*'s pursuit of leadership autonomy for the Mandarin congregation during the uncomfortable meeting with the senior pastor of the local Baptist church (3.2.1) to some extent mirrors, within a Cantonese-dominant Hong Kong, the experiences of English-speaking congregations as described by Todd and Chu. Further intensifying these dynamics is the tendency of first-generation GMBC leaders to exhibit a sense of accomplishment and model minority status in their professional, personal, and spiritual lives. However, during the interaction with the local senior pastor, Vasilios*'s lay status and leadership capabilities were questioned. This, compounded by the language barrier, likely fostered a sense of inadequacy, albeit masked. Vasilios*'s pride in establishing GMBC despite the senior pastor's initial doubts, as revealed in the interview, further underscores his strong motivation to prove himself as a

²⁵⁹ Michael K. Chu, *Intercultural Competence: Cultural Intelligence, Pastoral Leadership, and the Chinese Church* (Macquarie Park: Morling Press, 2019), 183-94.

competent church leader. However, such a competitive mindset reinforced the sense of “otherness” of the local Cantonese Christian communities.

Further analysis suggests that this "sense of inferiority" extends beyond language alone. The first generation's resistance to fully embodying the traditional "father figure" leadership model, despite the congregation's expectations, reveals a similar desire for self-preservation and a reluctance to engage in the reciprocal vulnerability inherent in deeper relationships. While their concerns about replicating potentially harmful power dynamics are valid, the data suggests that their resistance also stems from a deeper aversion to dependence and the potential burdens associated with a paternal role. This is evident in Elias*'s self-description as a "giver" and "provider,"(3.1.4) someone who offers support and guidance but avoids becoming a recipient of care himself. His decision to leave Hong Kong after retirement, refusing the support typically offered to family members, further reinforces this desire for distance and self-reliance. By maintaining a certain emotional detachment, first-generation leaders could shield themselves from the potential pain of vulnerability and the demands of reciprocal caregiving, albeit at the expense of fostering deeper connections with the younger generation and the city of Hong Kong.

Departing “home”: the search for more expansive belonging

The experiences of GMBC's second-generation leaders reveal a profound sense of displacement and a longing for a more inclusive and adaptable understanding of belonging. This yearning does not stem from a simple rejection of "home," but from a desire to redefine its boundaries, making it more relevant to their lived realities. The explorations and pursuits of these second-generation leaders, particularly amidst the crises and challenges of GMBC's transitional phase, offer complementary and constructive critiques to existing literature. Their experiences highlight the gap between the idealized image of "home" and the complex negotiations of belonging undertaken by younger generations within a rapidly changing context.

As reflected in the GMBC data, the prevailing "home" or "family" metaphor, while frequently invoked, can coexist with significant intergenerational struggles and

conflicts. However, some existing research like Matthew Todd's work on Chinese diaspora churches, tends to describe, or even reaffirm, this idealized image of familial harmony as dominant.²⁶⁰ As suggested by Todd's title, "Retaining the Next Generation in Chinese Diaspora Churches," his analysis, while framed around the younger generation's departure, primarily reflects the perspective of the first generation within these churches.²⁶¹ He concentrates on structural adjustments, such as the "associated independent parallel congregation model," which emphasizes actions the older generation can take to prevent the so-called "silent exodus."²⁶² The very term "silent exodus," while highlighting the departure of younger members, begs the question: are they truly silent, or are their voices simply unheard by the first generation holding the reins of power within these churches?²⁶³

The experiences of second-generation leaders at GMBC challenge the narrative of harmonious multi-generationalism. While the idealized image of "home" or "family" is frequently invoked, the GMBC data reveals its coexistence with significant intergenerational struggles. Navigating the complexities of GMBC's transitional phase, these leaders offer valuable critiques and insights into the evolving context of leadership. Each leader addresses perceived shortcomings in the first generation's approach, drawing on diverse inspirations to contribute new perspectives. However, their proposed approaches and images also reveal inconsistencies and limitations requiring further reflections. For instance, Ioannis*, for instance, envisions the church as a "business company," with God as the boss and the church leader as the CEO (3.2.5). This metaphor, while seemingly pragmatic, reflects a continuation of the first generation's managerial approach and a desire for clearer roles and responsibilities amidst the uncertainties of the transitional period. However, this model struggles to address the emotional and relational needs often associated with belonging, potentially explaining its limited resonance with other second-generation leaders. Furthermore, his emphasis on numerical growth as a measure of success reveals a potentially reductive and commercialized understanding of the church's mission.

²⁶⁰ Todd, "Retaining the Next Generation in Chinese Diaspora Churches," 352.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Ibid., 353.

²⁶³ Ibid., 352.

Neofytos*, in contrast, advocates for a return to a singular, patriarchal pastoral leadership model and envisions GMBC evolving into a local Hong Kong community church (3.2.5). This vision, while affirming the "family" image, represents a near-complete rejection of the first generation's collective leadership model. His perspective suggests a yearning for stability and tradition amidst rapid change, potentially as a reaction against the perceived weaknesses of the existing structure. However, it overlooks the potential for generational tensions inherent in patriarchal leadership and the current importance of Mandarin-speaking identity for GMBC's community.

Nasos*'s metaphor of a "ship adrift," unlike previous models, resonates deeply with the second generation's experience. This image, though specific to the elders team and tinged with uncertainty, represents a significant shift from his earlier characterization of the church community as "rootless duckweed." The "ship adrift" metaphor acknowledges the challenges of navigating an uncertain future but emphasizes the shared journey and collective responsibility. The concept of "being in the same boat" highlights the importance of mutual support and a willingness to embrace vulnerability and human limitations.

These diverse perspectives, though sometimes conflicting, reveal a shared desire for a more inclusive and adaptable understanding of belonging. The second generation's experiences at GMBC suggest that belonging is not about rigidly adhering to the "home" metaphor, but about navigating a shared journey of becoming, characterized by mutual learning, support, and a willingness to embrace the fluid and dynamic nature of identity within a diaspora context.

4.1.3 The "Home" at a Crossroads: Divergent Visions of Church and Leadership

The preceding analysis of GMBC, in dialogue with ethnographic studies of other Chinese diaspora churches, reveals a complex and evolving understanding of the "home" metaphor. While shared language and the creation of family-like bonds serve as common strategies for fostering belonging, key distinctions emerge in the

heightened significance of physical space within GMBC and the first generation's particular approach to leadership. These distinctions, when examined through the lens of generational interplay, highlight the inherent tensions and divergent visions of church and leadership within GMBC.

The first generation's intense focus on securing a permanent physical space, as detailed in 4.1.1, transcends mere practical considerations. Their emotional responses to both the acquisition and subsequent loss of their building—Elias*'s lament of "leaving home" and Marios*'s unspoken torment—reveal a deeper dynamic. This profound attachment to place suggests a powerful need for control and stability, a tangible anchor in the face of the transience and uncertainty they experienced as "Hong Kong drifters." This need for control, born from insecurity, stands in contrast to the second generation's more fluid and adaptable understanding of belonging, rooted less in physical location and more in interpersonal connection and shared experience within the church community. Similarly, the first generation's resistance to fully embracing a paternalistic leadership model, despite the cultural expectations and implicit authority they held, reflects this same underlying dynamic. As discussed in 4.1.2, their aversion to vulnerability and the potential burdens of a paternal role, coupled with their emphasis on self-reliance and emotional detachment, suggests a desire to maintain control over their lives and the church's direction. This desire, while understandable given their experiences, created a disconnect with the second generation, who sought a more relational and collaborative leadership style.

This interplay of control and connection lies at the heart of the divergent visions of church and leadership within GMBC. The first generation's prioritization of control, manifested in their emphasis on physical space and a detached leadership style, clashes with the second generation's desire for deeper connection and shared responsibility. The "home" metaphor, therefore, becomes a site of negotiation and tension, a crossroads where differing understandings of belonging and leadership intersect. This tension underscores the need for a deeper theological examination of the "home" metaphor, exploring its potential to both foster belonging and reinforce anxieties, particularly in the context of generational transition and the evolving needs

of a diaspora community. The following section will delve into these theological dimensions, examining how the "home" metaphor has been interpreted and applied within various Christian traditions.

4.2 "Home" Reconsidered: A Theological Examination of Church and Leadership

This section critically examines how the images of "home" and "family" have been used to understand the church and its leadership. Rather than seeking a singular normative theological framework, this analysis explores two distinct approaches—Ray S. Anderson's concept of the church as "home of personhood" and "new family of God," and Alexander Chow's notion of the church as a "surrogate family" led by "public intellectuals"—as illustrative cases. By analyzing these two approaches, highlighting their different emphases and outcomes, this section aims to demonstrate the power and potential limitations of using such images to bridge theological concepts with the complexities of lived experience. This comparative analysis will then pave the way for further theological development in subsequent chapters, exploring alternative frameworks that move beyond static boundaries towards a more dynamic and expansive vision of the church community.

4.2.1 "Home of Personhood" and "New Family of God": Insights and Imbalances in Ray Anderson's Thought

Ray S. Anderson's work represents a crucial juncture in practical theology, particularly for this study, for several key reasons. His sustained efforts to bridge doctrinal ecclesiology with an empirically-informed theology of the church, especially his exploration of leadership, anticipate many of this project's concerns. Specifically, his emphasis on the self-sufficiency of doctrinal ontology, rooted in a Barthian tradition, provides a productive contrast to the more contextually-sensitive approaches explored later, particularly in Chapter 5 with Chloe Lynch and Chapter 7 with Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This section, however, primarily focuses on his development of the "home/family" image as a case study describing the church.

Despite Anderson's valuable doctrinal insights, his "home/family" metaphors, rather than facilitating a connection with lived experience, expose weaknesses in his doctrinal construction and a lack of contextual sensitivity. Critically examining Anderson's work clarifies the need for a more nuanced approach that maintains theological rigor while providing a framework attentive to the concrete relationships within specific ecclesial contexts.

Anderson's theological thought is characterized by an ecclesiology grounded in the "inner logic" of the incarnation, a foundation for his later theological developments, as noted by Lynch.²⁶⁴ Influenced by T. F. Torrance, Anderson shifted from a metaphorical understanding of incarnation to one that recognized it as foundational for humanity's communion with God through Christ's vicarious humanity. This became the bedrock of Anderson's practical theology, evident in his understanding of the church as the "home of personhood" and the "family of God," developed in *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* and *On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family*. This section explores this question through an analysis of two of his works: *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* and *On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family*.²⁶⁵

In his doctoral study, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God*, Anderson presents a nuanced vision of the church through two interconnected concepts: the "kenotic community" and the "ek-static community."²⁶⁶ The relevant chapter from this work is reproduced in his later, more widely known edited volume, *Theological Foundations for Ministry*, highlighting its importance for Anderson.²⁶⁷ In this theological construction, particularly regarding the "kenotic community," Anderson grounds the ontology of the Church in the doctrine of Christ's incarnation and self-

²⁶⁴ Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship*, (New York: Routledge, 2019), 46-7. See also, Ray S. Anderson, *The Soul of God: A Theological Memoir* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 70.

²⁶⁵ Ray S. Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1975); Ray S. Anderson and Dennis B. Guernsey, *On Being Family: A Social Theology of the Family* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1985).

²⁶⁶ Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God*, 227-51.

²⁶⁷ Ray S. Anderson, "Living in Spirit," in *Theological Foundations for Ministry: Selected Readings for a Theology of the Church in Ministry*, ed. Ray S. Anderson (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 302-29.

emptying.²⁶⁸ However, he does utilize other metaphors. Specifically, Anderson envisions the church as a "home of personhood,"²⁶⁹ fostering authentic relationships that nurture individual growth and embrace vulnerability. Within this community, members emulate Christ's self-giving love through prioritizing others' needs and practicing radical hospitality, thereby cultivating belonging. He further develops this concept of "home" as follows:

The word which I am searching for in attempting to interpret this in terms of a form for the church could be best expressed as "domestic". The home, or domicile for man is community with God. There he receives his true personhood. In this sense of the word, domestic refers to the total context in which the Spirit of God works to create man's personhood. The Spirit can be known as the "domesticating" Spirit of God, who creates the place where man learns to receive his personhood. It is not too difficult to interpret the creation story (as given in Genesis) domestically. The world is for man his domicile, his home with God, in which he is a participant with God in the creative process. All the while, man is learning to receive and growing towards his true personhood.²⁷⁰

However, Anderson seems to recognize the potential for the inward-focused metaphor of "home" to become isolating. Therefore, he pairs it with the concept of the "ek-static community," drawing upon the Greek word *ekstasis*, meaning "to stand outside oneself."²⁷¹ For Anderson, the ek-static community is characterized by an outward movement, a pouring out of love and service into the world. This outward movement, he argues, stems directly from the inward transformation experienced within the kenotic community. Furthermore, he emphasizes that the Word made flesh in Christ and the active presence of the Spirit are inseparable. Therefore, the kenotic community, grounded in the Word, is simultaneously empowered by the Spirit to live out that Word in the world through *ekstasis*.²⁷²

It is possible that Anderson sought a unifying theological image to encompass both "kenosis" and "ekstasis" as crucial dimensions of ecclesiology, but his "home of personhood" imagery only captures the former. Alternatively, one could argue that

²⁶⁸ Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God*, 229.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 237.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 239.

²⁷² See *Ibid.*, 238–51.

while Anderson posits a close interconnection between the church's inward and outward focus, the inherent tension between "kenosis" and "ekstasis" remains unresolved within his theological framing. He acknowledges the church's dual purpose of nurturing members and engaging in mission, but lacks a coherent framework to reconcile this doctrinal tension. While this limitation is less apparent when expressed in doctrinal language, it becomes particularly evident in his later theological imagery of the church as the "New Family of God," developed in *On Being Family*, his collaborative work with sociologist Dennis B. Guernsey.²⁷³ In this work, Anderson effectively develops the "kenotic" aspect, or "home of personhood," of his earlier theology. After examining the dynamics of family life with Guernsey, he extends the "family" metaphor to the church community. He posits this "new family," distinct from biological ties, as offering belonging and identity through spiritual rebirth in Christ. Characterized by "parity"—denoting "sharers" in the *koinonia* of Christ—and unconditional love, this "new family" promises equality for all.²⁷⁴ Through this theological image of the "new family," Anderson powerfully dismantles barriers of merit, marital status, or social standing within the "household of faith."²⁷⁵ He emphasizes the church's role in offering belonging and worth to those who feel broken or ostracized, echoing the radical inclusivity of Christ's own ministry.

Anderson may have sought a unifying theological image encompassing both kenosis and ekstasis as crucial ecclesiological dimensions, but his "home of personhood" imagery captures only the former. Alternatively, while Anderson posits a close interconnection between the church's inward and outward focus, the inherent tension between kenosis and ekstasis remains unresolved within his theological framework. He acknowledges the church's dual purpose of nurturing members and engaging in mission, yet lacks a coherent framework to reconcile this doctrinal tension. While less apparent when expressed doctrinally, this limitation becomes evident in his later "New Family of God" ecclesiological imagery, developed in *On Being Family* with sociologist Dennis B. Guernsey.²⁷⁶ Here, Anderson effectively develops the kenotic,

²⁷³ Anderson and Guernsey, *On Being Family*, 127-37.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 127-37.

or "home of personhood," aspect of his earlier theology. Examining family dynamics with Guernsey, he extends the "family" metaphor to the church, positing this "new family," distinct from biological ties, as offering belonging and identity through spiritual rebirth in Christ. Characterized by "parity"—denoting "sharers" in the *koinonia* of Christ—and unconditional love, this "new family" promises equality for all.²⁷⁷ Through this theological image of the "new family," Anderson powerfully dismantles barriers of merit, marital status, or social standing within the "household of faith."²⁷⁸ He emphasizes the church's role in offering belonging and worth to those who feel broken or ostracized, echoing the radical inclusivity of Christ's own ministry.

These attempts to refine the "family" image, while striving for greater theological balance, are ultimately unsuccessful on two fronts. Firstly, they render "family" excessively idealized and abstract, unlike any lived experience or relatable depiction of family life, thereby diminishing the metaphor's relevance. Secondly, this revised image, still prioritizing the kenotic aspect, leaves the ek-static dimension underdeveloped, hindering Anderson's engagement with the complexities of both the church and the broader social context of the 1980s. Ironically, as Robert Bellah highlights in *Habits of the Heart*, young Americans during this time often defined their identity by "leaving home" and "leaving church," suggesting a disconnect between Anderson's idealized vision of family and the lived experience of many.²⁷⁹ Conversely, Anderson's portrayal of "new family", lacking sufficient engagement with the complexities and inherent messiness of lived experience—including intergenerational tensions and inevitable conflicts—diminishes the emotional resonance and persuasiveness of his metaphor for both family and church. Similarly, Todd, in his work on the "silent exodus" from second-generation diasporic Chinese churches, proposes a vision of "new family of God" and "spiritual kinship" as a solution.²⁸⁰ While Todd does not directly cite Anderson, both seem to exemplify a common pitfall in the theological deployment of "family" imagery: though well-intentioned, it often lacks necessary attention to the complex, embodied relationships

²⁷⁷ Ibid., 133.

²⁷⁸ Ibid., 137.

²⁷⁹ Robert N. Bellah, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 53-63.

²⁸⁰ Todd, "Retaining the Next Generation in Chinese Diaspora Churches," 353-57.

required for genuine connection. Therefore, the “family” analogy of the church community inadequately addresses the differentiated roles and responsibilities within the church, including those of leaders and congregants. Consequently, Anderson’s emphasis on “parity” (as well as Todd’s emphasis on “kinship”) while theoretically egalitarian and attractive, provides limited practical guidance for navigating the complexities of lived experience and achieving the church’s mission.

That said, the disparity between the limitations of Anderson’s practical application and the depth of his theological framework warrants further investigation. This discrepancy cannot be solely attributed to disciplinary differences between systematic theology and empirical research; rather, it necessitates closer examination of the specific features of his theological construction itself. One clue lies in Anderson’s earlier, more familiar work, *On Being Human*,²⁸¹ where he employs the richer, more theologically robust concept of “co-humanity” to articulate the ontological relationality of the human person.²⁸² His unexpected omission of “co-humanity” from his ecclesiology, opting instead for “parity,” suggests a significant weakening of Anderson’s ecclesiological vision. While “parity” emphasizes equality within the church family, it lacks the robust ontological grounding of “co-humanity,” which roots the church’s relationality in the very being of God as revealed in Christ. The answer to this puzzle lies in Anderson’s earlier work, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God*, particularly his engagement with Bonhoeffer.

While Anderson acknowledges Bonhoeffer’s central quest for the form of Christ’s presence in the world, he is evidently dissatisfied with Bonhoeffer’s grounding of the reality of that presence in the concrete church community—more precisely, “Christ existing as (church) community”—a point developed later in this thesis.²⁸³ Anderson strongly maintains that “the ontic structure of community is not in co-humanity, nor even in co-suffering-humanity, but rather in the intra-divine transcendence concretely given in the Incarnation.”²⁸⁴ To this end, Anderson criticizes Bonhoeffer for grounding

²⁸¹ Ray S. Anderson, *On Being Human: Essays in Theological Anthropology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982). Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship*, 79.

²⁸² Anderson, *On Being Human*, 37.

²⁸³ Anderson, *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God*, 228.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 184.

the reality of God in "basic social relations," arguing that this ultimately leads to Bonhoeffer's tendency toward a "religionless Christianity."²⁸⁵

As this is not a study of systematic theology, the question of whether Anderson fully appreciates Bonhoeffer's complex and evolving thought, or whether his negative impression of "religionless Christianity" is accurate, will not be addressed here. However, his concern about defining the Church solely by "co-humanity" is understandable, though it arguably leads him to overcorrect. While Anderson utilizes the doctrine of the incarnation to defend the Church's unique character and, in his words, transcendence, this approach tends toward a generalized, abstract ecclesiology, missing the opportunity for a more nuanced exploration of the interpersonal dynamics and structures within the church community. This thinking continues in Anderson's dismissal of Bonhoeffer's sociological analysis of "community" and "society" in *Sanctorum Communio* as "not as helpful as it might be."²⁸⁶ He contends that his own concept of "the kenotic community as also the ecstatic community" sufficiently addresses the Church's unique identity.²⁸⁷ Perhaps the disconnect between Anderson's theological imagery of the Church and social reality arises from his comparative lack of engagement with sociological insights and lived social relations, a very area where Bonhoeffer demonstrates greater interest.

In fact, alternative solutions exist to Anderson's concern about concrete experiential relationships, including interpersonal ones, supplanting or threatening the divine dimension. One such example is Pete Ward's argument for a mutually perpendicular relationship between the transcendent and the empirical.²⁸⁸ Drawing on Barth's geometric analogy, Ward suggests that the divine and human dimensions, while distinct, exist in constant interplay, like intersecting lines.²⁸⁹ This orthogonality allows both to retain their unique characteristics while influencing each other. Therefore, emphasizing the divine does not necessitate downplaying the concrete, lived reality

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 228.

²⁸⁶ Ibid., 247.

²⁸⁷ Ibid.

²⁸⁸ Pete Ward, "Ecclesiology and Ethnography with Humility: Going through Barth," *Studia Theologica* 72, no. 1 (2018): 51–67.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., 54.

of the church within its context. Embracing this orthogonal interplay allows the church to affirm both its transcendent grounding and its active engagement with the world, avoiding the pitfalls of an overly inward-focused interpretation of the doctrine of incarnation.

Although Anderson's theological work is somewhat neglected today, this section's engagement with his ideas remains instructive for this thesis. While Anderson's concepts of "home of personhood" and "new family of God" help to theologically ground a sense of belonging, the metaphor's inherent entanglement with social structures, relationships, and lived experience reveals weaknesses in his theological construction. My critique here is not a simple bottom-up, qualitative challenge to theological normativity, nor a rejection of "family" as *one* possible image of the Church. Rather, it highlights how Anderson, a practical theologian emphasizing Christopraxis, could benefit from deeper engagement with actual social structures and interpersonal relationships in his theological reflections—or, to use a term he might find less appealing, a more "correlational" engagement. I now turn to an approach to the "family" image of the church community that is more attentive to Chinese culture and the specific context of the Chinese Church.

4.2.2 "Surrogate Family" and "Public Intellectuals": Alexander Chow's Contextualized Approach to Chinese Church and Leadership

In contrast to Anderson's project, Alexander Chow's development of the "Christian Family as a Public Body" demonstrates a keener awareness of social realities.²⁹⁰ This is particularly evident in his nuanced understanding of the strengths and limitations of familial metaphors within the Chinese cultural context. Chow posits that the church in China often serves as a "surrogate family",²⁹¹ filling the void left by the breakdown of traditional structures and offering a sense of belonging and community

²⁹⁰ Alexander Chow, "The Christian Family as a Public Body," in *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 146.

amidst the rapid social transformations and disruptions to traditional structures characterizing contemporary China. This phenomenon underscores the profound societal shifts underway and highlights the church's role in providing stability and connection amidst this change. Although Chow's observations do not explicitly address Chinese diaspora communities, his term "surrogate family", echoing the loss of traditional Chinese values and societal structures.

Furthermore, while Chow focuses on public life, his observations offer a compelling lens through which to understand the internal dynamics of the church within a specific cultural context. His analysis highlights the strengths of the "family" image, particularly its resonance with Confucian values of collective identity and the interconnectedness of personal and societal transformation.²⁹² The church, in this sense, becomes a site for inward moral and spiritual formation that extends outward, influencing the public sphere. This reorientation of familial structures onto the church, Chow notes, places "extra emphasis on the pastors and the elders as patriarchs who have Christian families under their care".²⁹³ However, Chow acknowledges the potential pitfalls of directly mapping Confucian familial structures onto the church. The emphasis on hierarchy within Confucianism, while presented by Chow as containing elements of reciprocity, can easily be misconstrued to justify authoritarian leadership and the subordination of women.²⁹⁴ Chow seeks to mitigate these risks by proposing a "theology of reciprocity," drawing upon both New Testament teachings and John Zizioulas's concept of "relational personhood".²⁹⁵ This approach emphasizes mutual responsibility, respect, and interdependence within the church, aligning with Zizioulas's understanding of the Trinity as a model for genuine communion.

It is noteworthy that while Chow adopts the "surrogate family" image from Cao, he avoids the "surrogate father" label for church leaders, preferring "public

²⁹² As Chow argues, through the Confucian ritual (*li*), moral transformation within the family "is magically manifested in the outworkings of moral excellence in the society and, indeed, the empire". See *Ibid.*, 147.

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 150.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 150-53.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 153-55.

intellectual."²⁹⁶ By using "public intellectual," Chow emphasizes the church leader's role in the public sphere, drawing on Confucian ideals of the scholar-official who contributes to the moral and intellectual life of the community. This contrasts with the more inward-focused image of "surrogate father" and highlights the church's public engagement. Chow's depiction of public intellectuals as moral exemplars and educators resonates with GMBC's first-generation leaders, particularly their emphasis on personal integrity and embodiment of "biblical" values. Vasilios's insistence on consistent conduct between workplace and church, and Marios's focus on elder exemplarity, echo this observation. Moreover, GMBC's founders who hold university positions embody this "public intellectual" ideal, serving as educators both professionally and within the church through their teaching and biblical exposition.

However, Chow also acknowledges the potential downsides of this "public intellectual" image.²⁹⁷ The expectation of moral perfection can lead to elitism and intolerance for dissent within the church. In GMBC, this manifests in the "good example" mentality, where leaders, striving to embody the "Soldiers of Christ" ideal, may struggle to empathize with the challenges faced by those deemed apparently less spiritually mature. The pressure to maintain a flawless image can also hinder vulnerability and foster a culture of suppressed disagreements, particularly when "biblical" justifications, rather than fostering agreement, exacerbate existing divisions. These phenomena strongly resonate with Chow's concerns of this leadership image. A further intriguing nuance lies in the imperfect alignment between the image of the church leader as "public intellectual" and the image of the church as "family". This discrepancy mirrors a similar gap and complex tension between images of leadership and images of the church within GMBC itself, a point that will be explored further below.

Chow's depiction of the Chinese church as a "surrogate family" encounters a critical paradox in Chinese churches when viewed through the lens of generational change. If younger generations are increasingly questioning and redefining traditional family

²⁹⁶ Ibid., 158.

²⁹⁷ Ibid.

values, how can the church maintain the appeal of the family image – and, which family image? Such tension, already evident in Yang's analysis of "adhesive identity"²⁹⁸ and Wang's study on the "interlocking identities" of different generations,²⁹⁹ becomes particularly pronounced in the "Silent Exodus" of second-generation Christians. This generational divide of identity stems from the complex interplay of cultural, national, and societal influences shaping younger generations, often leading to conflicts with the traditional family image. Such tension around the family image is further exemplified in Jackson et al.'s study on women negotiating tradition and modernity in Hong Kong and British families,³⁰⁰ which demonstrates that traditional values and images are constantly being reshaped and reinterpreted within evolving contexts. Park's research on intermarriage within Chinese-American Christian families also highlights the clash between collectivist and individualist values,³⁰¹ with younger generations prioritizing personal happiness and autonomy in choosing a spouse, while older generations emphasize the preservation of family lineage and tradition. The church, often a bastion of traditional values, finds itself precariously positioned at the crossroads of this generational conflict.

While Chow rightly points to the theological potential of the "surrogate family" metaphor and its grounding in scripture, its viability ultimately depends on its resonance with social realities. The evolving understanding of family structures and authority, as evidenced by the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement's challenge to traditional hierarchies,³⁰² suggests a growing disconnect between the church's model and the lived experiences of younger generations. If the church clings to an idealized, potentially outdated understanding of "family," the metaphor risks

²⁹⁸ Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 163-86.

²⁹⁹ Paul C. Wang, "A Study on Cross-Cultural Conflict Patterns and Intervention between Two Generations of Leaders in Two Chinese Churches in Vancouver: Toward a Vibrant Intergenerational Partnership in Ministry" (DMin project, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2003).

³⁰⁰ Stevi Jackson, Sue Scott, Rachel Brooks, and Helen Ruppeltdt, "Reshaping Tradition? Women Negotiating the Boundaries of Tradition and Modernity in Hong Kong and British Families," *The Sociological Review* 61, no. 4 (2013): 667-88.

³⁰¹ Ruth Soong Park, "Intergenerational Conflict That Arises from Intermarriage among Chinese-American Christian Families: A Christian Transformative Learning Experience" (PhD dissertation, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 2017).

³⁰² Petula Sik Ying Ho et al., "Speaking against Silence: Finding a Voice in Hong Kong Chinese Families through the Umbrella Movement," *Sociology* (Oxford) 52, no. 5 (2018): 965-81.

becoming not only ineffective but also a source of alienation. This disconnect is further exacerbated by the inherent complexities of the "family" metaphor itself. As Chow notes, citing David Balch, scriptural references to "household" and familial relationships (e.g., in Ephesians and Colossians) have been subject to varied interpretations, some reinforcing hierarchical structures while others promote more egalitarian ideals.³⁰³ Therefore, the church must critically examine its use of the "family" metaphor, ensuring that it fosters genuine belonging and mutual support rather than replicating potentially harmful power dynamics. A failure to adapt to evolving social realities and engage in ongoing critical reflection risks rendering the "surrogate family" not a source of strength and resilience in public life, but rather a fragile and ultimately unsustainable model for younger Christians seeking authentic community and spiritual guidance.

Finally, a comparison of Chow and Anderson's construction of the theological image of 'home' or 'family' is warranted. Both recognize the inherent metaphorical power of belonging embedded within these images, aiming to bridge theological concepts with lived experience. However, lacking Chow's nuanced investigation into the complexities and lived realities of 'home' and 'family,' Anderson's application, while connecting doctrinal concepts with experience, inadvertently highlights the disconnect between theology and lived experience. Chow's nuanced approach is precisely his strength. By deeply engaging with the realities of ecclesial contexts and Confucian cultural systems, Chow's use of 'family' as a theological image not only bridges theology and lived experience but also probes more nuanced challenges of this image.

Given these insights, Chow's attempt to reinterpret Confucianism through the lens of Zizioulas's Trinitarian theology challenges the common understanding of Confucianism as inherently and rigidly hierarchical. By tracing the concept of reciprocity in relationships back to the earlier teachings of Confucius and Mencius,

³⁰³ Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 154n22. See also, David L. Balch, "Household Codes," in *Greco-Roman Literature and the New Testament: Selected Forms and Genres*, ed. David E. Aune (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988), 25–50.

Chow proposes a "theology of reciprocity".³⁰⁴ However, whether this resonates within contemporary Confucian thought in Chinese communities and fosters theological and ecclesial renewal remains unclear. In the following section, I will engage with contemporary Confucian philosophical perspectives, particularly those resonant within diasporic Chinese communities, such as Vincent Shen's concept of 'mutual enrichment,' addressing their reflections on reciprocity in relationships to facilitate further theological exploration.

4.3 Beyond "Spiritual Rooting": Confucian Philosophical Lenses on Chinese Diasporic Communities

One aspect of the church image, reflected in the ethnographic data from GMBC but not yet fully addressed in this discussion, is that of "change." The seemingly stable "home" image, initially resonating with the Mandarin-speaking congregation's desire for identity and belonging, was destabilized by forced relocation and evolving generational understandings of belonging. While observed within a specific group, this finding echoes Stuart Hall's critique of fixed identities within diasporic cultures.³⁰⁵ Hall argues that, particularly for diasporic communities, identities are not fixed essences but rather fluid and dynamic productions, constantly shaped by history, power, and cultural interaction.³⁰⁶ Hall's observation that representation, both visual and linguistic, constitutes identity—a process that is "never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation"—resonates strongly with the struggles of GMBC leaders as they grapple with appropriate metaphors, such as "home" or "military camp," to describe their community.³⁰⁷ This ongoing negotiation, intertwined with shifting social contexts and generational change within the group—a process in which even this research arguably participates—highlights the relevance of Hall's engagement with Foucault's "fatal

³⁰⁴ See Chow, *Chinese Public Theology*, 153-154, where Chow traces the concept of reciprocity in relationships back to the earlier teachings of Confucius and Mencius, predating Dong Zhongshu's hierarchical interpretation.

³⁰⁵ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jana Evans Braziel and Anita Mannur (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 225-6.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 236-37.

couplet" of knowledge and power, particularly within the complex identity formation of diasporic communities.³⁰⁸ It reminds researchers that theological reflection, while not inherently a form of Western imposition, must nevertheless attend to various voices, including the influence of Confucian philosophy on Chinese diasporic communities, rather than objectifying them as subjects requiring intervention.

In the specific case of GMBC, this engagement necessitates acknowledging that while theologically influenced by North American evangelicalism, the church simultaneously navigates a complex interaction with its Chinese heritage, particularly as it reflects, along with broader Chinese diasporic churches, Confucian values, especially those related to family. Therefore, engaging with Confucianism, particularly by incorporating the perspectives of Chinese philosophical scholars, is crucial for transcending stereotypical, monolithic interpretations. This approach respects Confucianism as a vital partner in the ongoing process of "faith seeking understanding" within the Chinese diasporic context. Specifically, Chinese philosophical thought, including Confucianism, should be approached as a dynamic and evolving tradition. In this section, I will analyze how Chinese philosophical perspectives, particularly the concepts of "spiritual rooting" and "mutual enrichment," offer alternative frameworks for understanding diaspora and belonging, challenging the limitations of static identity constructs and informing a more dynamic vision of the church.

4.3.1 Tang Junyi and "Spiritual Rooting": Preserving Identity Amidst Displacement

This exploration begins with Tang Junyi, whose evocative image of “花果飄零” (scattered blossoms and fallen fruit) captured the sense of fragmentation and loss experienced by many overseas Chinese, including Christians, during the mid-20th century diaspora (as discussed in Chapter One). This profound yearning for belonging and continuity in the face of displacement led Tang to develop the concept of “靈根自植” (spiritual rooting), a call for cultural preservation that prompted

³⁰⁸ Ibid., 226.

generations of overseas Chinese to reflect on and engage with Chinese philosophical traditions, particularly Confucianism, shaping their evolving intellectual landscape.³⁰⁹ Tang's terminology offers a valuable starting point for understanding how individuals and communities sought to maintain their cultural identity amidst the disorientation of diaspora.

"Spiritual rooting," for Tang, involved transplanting core cultural values and practices – what he termed "Chinese-ness" (中國性) – into new environments. While Tang does not explicitly detail the content of "Chinese-ness" or "spiritual roots" in this article, it is reasonable to assume he connects these concepts to the "spirit of the Middle Way" (中道精神), manifested in Chinese culture and language through concepts like self-cultivation, filial piety, respect for teachers, and other familial and societal values, grounding them in Confucian ideals of personal development.³¹⁰ Nonetheless, he does not advocate strict adherence to a Confucian ideal but suggests that "individuals can embrace diverse ideals, grounded in self-reflection and conviction".³¹¹ He emphasizes:

Thus, wherever they may scatter, they can establish their spiritual roots, adapting to their environment with creative ideals, will, and practice. They can act with a clear conscience, benefiting themselves, others, their nation, and humanity ... so that when the opportune moment arrives, they can collectively contribute to the rejuvenation of Chinese culture and flourish within the world.³¹²

It is evident that while Tang views the Chinese diaspora from a Chinese (and specifically Confucian) perspective, his approach to Chinese-ness is not defensively insular but rather characterized by self-reflection and an altruistic sense of responsibility. Although Tang does not explicitly address intercultural encounters

³⁰⁹ Tang Junyi 唐君毅, 說中華民族之花果飄零 [On the Flowering and Fruiting of the Chinese Nation] (Taipei: Sanmin Shuju, 1974), 30-59. As Vincent Shen notes, Tang was among the first contemporary Chinese philosophers to "seriously reflect the Chinese diaspora experience from philosophical perspectives." See Vincent Shen, "Chinese Philosophy in Diaspora and the Meaningfulness of Life for Chinese Overseas." *Hanxue Yanjiu* 漢學研究 31, no. 2 (2013): 15.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 15.

³¹¹ Translated from "...人亦儘可抱不同之理想，而各有其由自覺反省而自信自守之處，以自植靈根。" See Tang, *Lun Zhonghua minzu zhi huaguo piao ling*, 59.

³¹² *Ibid.*, 60-61.

within the diaspora, his openness and reflexivity paved the way for later Confucian scholars abroad.

Tang's ideas resonated not only within academic circles but also within the lived experiences of overseas Chinese communities, including Chinese Christian communities. As Yang observed, the North American Chinese Christian community's commitment to the Chinese language and positive embrace of Confucian traditions (where not conflicting with Christian values) resonates with this concept of "spiritual rooting."³¹³ This also finds resonance in the early experiences of GMBC. Nasos*'s description of this community as "rootless duckweed" strongly echoes Tang's "scattered blossoms and fallen fruit," while the efforts of the first-generation elders demonstrate a clear desire for "spiritual rooting." Although these leaders may be unaware of the origin of this rhetoric, their actions demonstrate the resonance of Tang's concepts within the shared experience of the Chinese diasporic community.³¹⁴

As the global landscape shifted and intercultural encounters became increasingly common, the limitations of a solely inward-focused approach to diaspora became apparent. While "spiritual rooting" offered a valuable framework for navigating the initial shock of displacement, it risked a degree of insularity. The need for a more dynamic and outward-facing approach, one that acknowledged the transformative potential of encountering difference, became increasingly evident. Numerous subsequent scholars, operating within a more globalized framework, have continued Tang's exploration of Chinese diasporic communities.

4.3.2 Beyond "Spiritual Rooting": Vincent Shen's "Mutual Enrichment"

³¹³ In Yang's observation, the terms "uprooting" and "rootless" are frequently used to describe the diasporic experience and identity crisis within North American Chinese churches. For instance, see Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 27-30, 40, 132.

³¹⁴ It is noteworthy that Tang Junyi's perception of Christianity was not entirely favorable. He perceived Christianity, as a Western cultural element, to be a threat to the "spiritual roots" of traditional Chinese culture.

Vincent Shen (沈清松), a prominent Taiwanese philosopher of Chinese thought, offers an alternative framework for understanding diaspora and belonging, emerging from within the Chinese philosophical tradition itself. Before articulating his framework of "mutual enrichment" (相互豐富), Shen meticulously traces the development of thought among Chinese intellectuals grappling with diaspora, particularly overseas scholars. He positions "mutual enrichment" as both a continuation and a refinement of Tang Junyi's ideas, acknowledging the need for adaptation in a globalized world where encounters with difference are inevitable. Shen's approach is particularly compelling because it is grounded in the lived experiences and insights of Chinese scholars who, like Tang, found themselves scattered across the globe.³¹⁵

Shen identifies a distinct progression in approaches to understanding diaspora. He observes that the initial focus, exemplified by Tang's "spiritual rooting," centered on preserving a sense of "Chineseness" amidst displacement, often through deep engagement with Confucian values.³¹⁶ As Chinese philosophy gained a foothold in Western academia, a new awareness emerged. Later scholars like Antonio Cua and Chung-ying Cheng recognized the limitations of a solely inward-focused approach, exploring ways of navigating encounters with different values through concepts like "balance in conflict" and "harmonious dialectics."³¹⁷ This shift signaled a move towards a more relational and interactive understanding of identity.

Shen builds upon these insights, arguing that the next stage requires moving beyond balance or harmony to embracing the transformative potential of "mutual enrichment." Central to this vision is reciprocity – a mutual exchange of giving and receiving, learning and teaching, understanding and being understood. Shen connects this principle to the Confucian concepts of *jen* (仁) and *shu* (恕), or extending oneself to others (推己及人), which he further distinguishes as "dynamic reciprocity" (動態的相互性) and "other-oriented reciprocity" (他者導向的相互性) in

³¹⁵ Shen, "Chinese Philosophy in Diaspora and the Meaningfulness of Life for Chinese Overseas," 7-34. Specifically, see the introduction which discusses the philosophical implications of diaspora.

³¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 14-19.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 20-24.

contrast to “institutional reciprocity” (制度化的相互性) or “self-centered reciprocity” (自我中心的相互性).³¹⁸ This challenges the potential insularity of the “home” metaphor, promoting a more relational approach to belonging. It surpasses merely treating others as we desire to be treated; it advocates for actively striving to comprehend and address their needs and perspectives, engaging with the world in a spirit of generosity and open-mindedness.

Building on reciprocity, Shen introduces “mutual strangification” (相互外推).³¹⁹ He uses this term not to advocate for alienation, but to highlight the importance of actively engaging with difference, resisting the urge to simplify intercultural encounters. “Shen’s concept of “mutual strangification” (相互外推) is a crucial element of his “mutual enrichment” framework and deserves further elaboration. He proposes that this process unfolds on three interconnected levels: linguistic, practical, and ontological.³²⁰ *Linguistic strangification* involves understanding core cultural values and beliefs into the language and conceptual frameworks of the “Other.” Shen emphasizes that “language appropriation” (語言習取) further facilitates this process. It is not merely language acquisition, but rather actively engaging, through language, with the linguistic and conceptual richness of other cultures to broaden one’s own understanding, enabling deeper mutual understanding and engagement. *Practical strangification* entails taking one’s own values and practices out of their familiar context and applying them within the social and organizational structures of another culture. This can reveal the limitations and assumptions embedded within one’s own cultural practices. Finally, *ontological strangification* involves engaging with the fundamental experiences and understandings of reality that shape different cultures. This deepest level of engagement requires a willingness to question one’s own ontological assumptions and grapple with alternative ways of being in the world. Through these three levels of “mutual strangification,” individuals and communities can move beyond superficial intercultural interactions and achieve a more profound understanding and

³¹⁸ Ibid., 24-30.

³¹⁹ Ibid., 27.

³²⁰ Ibid., 29-30.

appreciation of difference.³²¹ Shen emphasizes that while mutual strangification is a reciprocal interaction, a prioritized, proactive "primary generosity"("原初慷慨"), understood simply as a willingness to benefit the other, is a prerequisite for effective mutual strangification.

Shen's concept of "mutual strangification" warrants specific discussion because it offers a crucial framework for understanding the dynamics of belonging and difference within diaspora communities, particularly concerning the role of language. While shared language can initially foster a sense of belonging and preserve cultural identity, as seen in the early years of GMBC, it can also become a source of division and exclusion, both between the diaspora community and the host culture, and even across generations within the community itself. The unproductive dialogue between Vasilios* and the local Baptist pastor, as well as the intergenerational misunderstandings noted by Todd, exemplify these challenges. Shen's "strangification," particularly his emphasis on "language appropriation," provides a crucial lens for analyzing these dynamics and exploring how language can be used not as a barrier, but as a bridge for intercultural understanding and a tool for navigating the complexities of belonging in a diaspora context. Chu's research, demonstrating how effective language learning can mitigate obstacles and mistrust in intergenerational communication, further underscores the relevance of Shen's framework.

Further consideration of these examples reveals that language itself is not the decisive barrier, but rather exacerbates, though does not preclude overcoming, the difficulties in mutual understanding. More crucial, as Shen highlights, are "primary generosity" and "other-oriented reciprocity"—a willingness to engage with the world of the other while simultaneously opening one's own. Building on this understanding of language's role, Yang Fenggang's concept of "adhesive identities" offers further insight. Shared factors, including language, within a generation or specific group can act as "adhesives," shaping dynamic identity formations, such as the convergence of Confucian filial piety and conservative Christian family values. However, these

³²¹ Ibid., 30-31.

shared elements can also become points of vulnerability. Shifts in language, for example, can lead to the dissociation of identities and even divisions within a group's self-perception. If language or other shared values serve solely as unifiers without the engagement with difference—whether internal or external—that strangification encourages, the inherent fragility of such cohesion becomes evident. Strangification, with its emphasis on interest in and attention to the "Other," provides a crucial counterbalance. By prioritizing language as a tool for communication and learning, strangification fosters greater sensitivity and adaptability regarding one's own evolving identities.

However, this final level, "ontological strangification," and the respect it entails, presents certain theological challenges. Shen argues that:

[O]n the ontological-extrapolative level, cultural community A can strive, through reflection on experiences of reality itself—such as experiences of humanity, community, nature, or ultimate reality (e.g., *Jen* and *cheng* in Confucianism, *dao* and *de* in Daoism, emptiness in Buddhism, God in Christianity, Allah in Islam, etc.)—to enter the cultural or religious world of cultural community B.³²²

While Shen's call for engaging with different understandings of reality is commendable, it risks oversimplifying the complexities of intercultural encounters. Shen himself acknowledges these potential pitfalls, emphasizing the importance of reflexivity and critical self-awareness throughout the process of strangification.³²³

However, the assumption of a shared capacity for fully understanding others, while well-intentioned, can obscure the profound impact of historical injustices, power imbalances, and incommensurable worldviews. For instance, engaging with a culture's understanding of "ultimate reality" could inadvertently lead to the misinterpretation or appropriation of sacred beliefs. Furthermore, the emphasis on finding common ground at the ontological level could erase the very real differences that shape cultural identity and lead to a form of homogenizing universalism.

³²² *Ibid.*, 29.

³²³ *Ibid.*, 28-30.

I would argue that the challenges of ontological strangification invite a shift in focus from abstract systems of belief to the lived experience of individuals within those systems. This shift reveals the crucial role of shared humanity as a foundation for communication across ontological divides. While acknowledging the profound differences that shape our understandings of reality, strangification emphasizes the necessity of communication and learning as we encounter diverse ontological frameworks. This encounter compels one to rethink his or her own assumptions about self and community, pushing one beyond the limitations of both purely individualistic and traditional collectivist perspectives. Shen's "mutual enrichment" framework suggests that navigating these ontological differences can foster a more nuanced understanding of the individual's place within the collective—a sense of belonging rooted in shared experience yet open to the transformative potential of encountering other ways of being in the world. This approach avoids the pitfalls of imposing a homogenizing shared identity, instead recognizing individual uniqueness as an integral part of a dynamic and evolving whole.

Shen's discussion effectively challenges the stereotypical view of Confucian relationality as inherently hierarchical, suggesting the possibility of internal renewal. For Chinese churches, renewal necessitates engaging with, rather than dismissing, these insights. This engagement, however, requires what Chow terms a "theology of reciprocity"—one that is both robust and nuanced enough to address the complexities of interpersonal relationality within the church communities, particularly regarding the positioning of church leaders. This will be explored in Chapter 7 through Dietrich Bonhoeffer's concept of the "collective person" in *Sanctorum Communio*.

4.4 Beyond "Home": New Horizons of A Chinese Church Community

This chapter has explored the multifaceted nature of the "home" metaphor within GMBC, a Chinese diaspora church in Hong Kong. By examining the lived experiences of both first- and second-generation members, and engaging with relevant theological and philosophical perspectives, we have uncovered both the initial appeal and the inherent limitations of this metaphor. While "home" initially

offered a powerful sense of belonging and stability for the first generation, particularly in the transient urban landscape of Hong Kong, the forced relocation, evolving generational understandings of belonging, and the unique socio-political context exposed its inherent fragility and potential for exclusivity. The heightened significance of physical space in GMBC, contrasted with North American Chinese churches, underscored the first generation's desire for a tangible anchor in a constantly shifting environment. Their resistance to paternalistic leadership, while motivated by a desire to avoid abuses of power, also revealed a reluctance to embrace the vulnerability and interdependence inherent in deeper relationships. This tension between the desire for control and the need for connection became a recurring theme in GMBC's narrative.

The second generation's experiences further challenged the limitations of a static and bounded notion of "home." Their diverse visions for the church, ranging from a pragmatic "business company" model to a yearning for traditional patriarchal leadership, ultimately pointed towards a shared desire for a more inclusive and adaptable understanding of belonging. The image of a "ship adrift," while acknowledging the uncertainties of the future, emphasized the importance of shared navigation and mutual support in the face of challenging circumstances.

The theological and philosophical frameworks explored in this chapter offered valuable lenses for interpreting these dynamics. While Anderson's concepts of "home of personhood" and "new family of God" highlighted the nurturing aspect of the church, they ultimately fell short in addressing the complexities of outward engagement and the inherent tensions within the "family" metaphor itself. Chow's "surrogate family" and "public intellectual" offered a more contextually relevant approach, but still required further development to address the evolving social realities and generational shifts within Chinese diaspora communities. The insights of Tang Junyi and Vincent Shen, particularly the concepts of "spiritual rooting" and "mutual enrichment," provided alternative frameworks for understanding diaspora and belonging, emphasizing the importance of reciprocity and engagement with difference. Shen's notion of "mutual strangification," while presenting certain

theological challenges, offered a compelling pathway towards a more dynamic and expansive understanding of belonging.

This critical examination of the “Home” metaphor has substantiated the first part of this thesis's central argument, revealing how a foundational ecclesiological image can both foster a sense of belonging and, simultaneously, become a source of fragility and exclusion. However, an image of the church does not exist in isolation; it is intrinsically linked to the identity of its leaders. The limitations of the 'Home' metaphor thus point toward the need to analyze its counterpart in leadership. Therefore, having established the constraints of this ecclesiological image, the analysis must now turn to the "Soldier of Christ." The following chapter will examine this leadership metaphor, analyzing its interaction with the church's collective leadership model and exploring the tensions it creates within a Chinese diaspora context.

Chapter 5. The "Soldier of Christ" and the Burden of Leadership: Examining Collective Ecclesial Leadership

This chapter examines the lived experiences of leaders within GMBC's collective leadership model, focusing on the tension between the idealized image of leadership, particularly the "Soldier of Christ" metaphor, and the realities of shared practice. This tension, rooted in the metaphorical image of the "Soldier of Christ," is analyzed through three distinct yet interconnected lenses to unpack its theological and practical implications. First, organizational leadership theories (Section 5.1) are employed to explore the operational practices and dynamics within GMBC's leadership team, revealing the interplay between idealized leadership images, individual characteristics, cultural influences, and group dynamics. This analysis highlights the contrast between the first generation's leadership style, marked by implicit paternalism and leading by example, and the second generation's pursuit of a more collaborative approach. Second, the chapter reflects on the historical and theological dimensions of the "Soldier of Christ" metaphor (Section 5.2) by examining its use within Western missionary traditions and broader Christian discourse. While GMBC does not have a direct genealogical link to these traditions, exploring the metaphor's broader application reveals parallels and potential pitfalls relevant to GMBC's context. Finally, the chapter engages with Chloe Lynch's practical theological work on ecclesial leadership as friendship (Section 5.3). While acknowledging Lynch's strengths, particularly her critique of managerialism and emphasis on theological grounding for leadership, this analysis critically assesses the limitations of her "friendship" framework, especially its applicability to GMBC's specific cultural dynamics, and explores alternative approaches to leadership. By integrating these multifaceted analyses, this chapter contributes to a more nuanced understanding of collective leadership within GMBC, offering potential avenues for navigating leadership transition challenges and laying the groundwork for developing a transformed model of leadership.

5.1 Analyzing Leadership Dynamics through Organizational Lenses: From Trait to Shared Practice

This "Soldier of Christ" identity is not merely a theological choice but is deeply intertwined with the first generation's specific migration trajectory. As secondary migrants who likely entered the United States as skilled professionals under the post-1965 Hart-Celler Act, their lives were defined by a need for immense perseverance and discipline to achieve success. Their professional accomplishments were hard-won victories, reinforcing a self-perception as resilient fighters. The "soldier" metaphor, therefore, is an embodied one, reflecting a life spent overcoming obstacles. This stands in stark contrast to the second generation's more institutionalized path as educational migrants to Hong Kong, helping to explain their different orientation towards leadership and its inherent struggles.

Scholarly research on leadership within Chinese church contexts is still scarce, especially given the highly context-specific nature of leadership. However, some Christian scholars and organizational practitioners are collaborating with churches and theological institutions to explore these issues. Chung-Ming Lau, a Hong Kong-based management scholar, notes the scarcity of research specifically on church leadership, particularly within Chinese contexts, and explores potential connections between academic leadership theories and church practice.³²⁴ Lau suggests that even with limitations, organizational leadership theories offer a valuable framework for understanding the complexities of leadership by providing different perspectives on styles, behaviors, and contributing factors. They introduce helpful vocabulary and concepts, especially the models, which can enhance discussions and reflection, enabling church leaders to articulate their understanding of leadership, identify strengths and weaknesses, and pinpoint areas for growth. Ultimately, these theories stimulate deeper conversations about effective leadership within specific church contexts.³²⁵

³²⁴ Lau Chung-ming, "策略性的領導·領導的策略," in *教牧領導——生命的演繹* [Pastoral Leadership: An Interpretation of Life], by Joe Kok, Ng Shan-ho, Lau Chung-ming, and Yu Tat-sum, 96–119 (Hong Kong: China Graduate School of Theology, 2012).

³²⁵ Lau, *Pastoral Leadership*, 69-94.

Acknowledging the Western predominance of leadership theories, Hong Kong-based church scholar Otto Lui emphasizes their potential applicability within Chinese cultural contexts. He argues that both Western and Eastern societies share common beliefs, particularly given their shared Christian faith.³²⁶ Lui even suggests that Chinese culture-oriented scholarship can provide specific insights, “building upon existing Western theoretical foundations” thus mitigating a simplistic East-West dichotomy.³²⁷

Lau and Lui clarify common misconceptions among Christian theologians regarding organizational studies, particularly by helpfully positioning theories as analytical instruments for understanding and diagnosing organizational dynamics. These theories are not merely instrumental tools for achieving business objectives; they also provide lenses for understanding human behaviour. A multifaceted theoretical approach can illuminate the rationale behind specific leadership behaviours within an organisation, explain practical challenges, and facilitate effective assessment of leadership issues. Without these perspectives, a sacred-secular dichotomy may emerge, pushing ecclesial leadership from a pragmatic, utilitarian extreme to an impractically idealistic one. A more receptive approach would allow for a critical theological engagement with these theories, discerning and appropriating valuable insights while acknowledging their potential limitations and biases.

However, unlike theology's pursuit of precise and stable concepts, leadership theories are inherently provisional and fluid, constantly adapting to real-world challenges.³²⁸ This dynamism, evident in the ongoing critiques and refinements of these models, sustains their relevance. Static leadership blueprints derived solely from theological texts or scriptural interpretations often lack this adaptability. Therefore, a more fruitful approach integrates leadership theories into a broader theological framework, recognizing their value as analytical lenses for understanding

³²⁶ Otto Lui, *Development of Chinese Church Leaders: A Study of Relational Leadership in Contemporary Chinese Churches* (Carlisle: Langham, 2013), 76.

³²⁷ *Ibid.*, 48.

³²⁸ George C. Banks et al., "A Meta-analytic Review of Authentic and Transformational Leadership: A Test for Redundancy," *The Leadership Quarterly* 27 (2016): 634–52.

the lived experiences of church leaders and communities. When used critically alongside other perspectives, these theories can contribute significantly to a rigorous and practical theology of church leadership. Given the extensive body of research on leadership, a comprehensive systematic analysis is not feasible within the scope of this thesis. Therefore, the following subsections examine three particularly relevant models—trait, shared, and paternalistic leadership—corresponding to the individual, collective, and cultural dimensions, respectively.

This section explores the central tension between the idealized "Soldier of Christ" and the practical realities of shared leadership within GMBC, using three organizational leadership lenses: trait, paternalistic, and shared leadership. This progression, from individual traits to cultural influences (paternalism) and finally to group dynamics (shared leadership), reflects the layered complexities of GMBC and illuminates how the "Soldier of Christ" image (3.2) interacts with each level.

This analysis is crucial for understanding the perceived decline in effectiveness articulated by the second generation, highlighting the significant generational differences in leadership experience and expectations. By critically examining these theoretical frameworks in relation to GMBC's lived experience, this section aims to analyze the assumptions underpinning its collective leadership model, illuminate the power dynamics at play, and assess the suitability of the "Soldier of Christ" metaphor for the collective leadership model.

5.1.1 The Trait Model and its Limitations: Challenging the "Natural Leader" Myth

A dominant theory throughout the 20th century, the trait approach to leadership posits that effectiveness derives from possessing specific inherent and relatively stable personality characteristics.³²⁹ Often conceptualized in its early stages as "the Great Man" model, this approach emphasized the innate qualities of exceptional leaders like Napoleon or Abraham Lincoln, sometimes envisioned as a strong, masculine image.³³⁰ Despite criticism for neglecting situational factors and potential

³²⁹Peter G. Northouse, *Leadership: Theory and Practice* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2022), 27-51.

³³⁰ Northouse, *Leadership*, 27.

gender bias, the trait approach persisted, finding renewed vigor in the latter half of the 20th century with the burgeoning interest in charismatic and visionary leadership.³³¹ This renewed interest acknowledged the importance of both traits and situational factors, leading to a more balanced perspective.³³²

As Northouse indicates, the traditional trait theory suffers from clear weaknesses: the lack of a definitive list of leadership traits, the failure to fully account for situational factors, and the difficulty in establishing clear links between specific traits and outcomes. Therefore, as suggested by Jessica E. Dinh and Robert G. Lord, a shift away from static trait-based models towards a more dynamic, process-oriented approach emphasizing the interaction between individuals and their environment is warranted.³³³

In Chinese-based research, while Lui and Lau acknowledge the trait approach as a foundational concept within Chinese-based research, they also recognize its limitations in explaining the complexities of leadership, particularly in diverse cultural contexts such as the Chinese church.³³⁴ Notably, both Lui and Lau emphasize that while this approach can describe leader characteristics, it is less successful in predicting leadership effectiveness. This provides researchers with valuable insight into a group's leadership patterns and philosophies, particularly how their espoused values and beliefs interact with lived experience.

The traits leadership theory, with its emphasis on individual characteristics as the wellspring of leadership, exposes a stark paradox within GMBC's leadership system: On one hand, the very foundation of GMBC's leadership rests on a rotating eldership explicitly designed to prevent the concentration of power characteristic of the "great man" theory. This intentional decentralisation, born from a desire to avoid the potential for abuse exemplified by the biblical King Saul, as articulated by Marios* (3.2.1), and to foster shared responsibility, stands in direct contrast to the "great

³³¹ Ibid.

³³² Ibid.

³³³ Jessica E. Dinh and Robert G. Lord, "Implications of Dispositional and Process Views of Traits for Individual Difference Research in Leadership," *The Leadership Quarterly* 23 (2012): 651–69.

³³⁴ Lau, *Pastoral Leadership*, 89-90; Lui, *Development of Chinese Church Leaders*, 50.

man" archetype. The rejection of the traditional "senior pastor" model underscores this commitment to distributed leadership.

Yet, paradoxically, the first-generation elders frequently invoke the importance of individual traits. Vasilios*, for instance, stresses the paramount importance of personal integrity and self-discipline (3.2.2), emphasising the need to maintain credibility with colleagues who observe his behaviour in both professional and church settings. This emphasis on individual character is echoed by Marios*'s insistence that elders "have to set good examples," (3.2.2) highlighting a belief that leadership effectiveness stems, at least in part, from possessing and demonstrating desirable personal qualities.

Furthermore, the first generation's self-assured confidence, epitomized by Vasilios*'s assertion that "running a church is not that difficult,"(3.2.1) suggests an implicit belief in their inherent leadership capacity, aligning with the "great man" theory's emphasis on innate qualities. This confidence is further reinforced by their focus on role modelling and embodying a life of faith, as articulated by both Marios* and Elias* (3.2.4), echoing the concept of exemplary leadership where individual actions and character serve as inspiration. Thus, while GMBC's formal structure explicitly rejects the "great man" model, the lived experience and articulated beliefs of its first-generation leaders reveal a persistent emphasis on individual traits, creating a fundamental tension between the espoused ideal of collective leadership and the implicit valuation of individualistic leadership qualities.

The pervasive 'soldier of Christ' image at GMBC, while seemingly promoting collective identity, actually exacerbates the tension between individual traits and collective leadership. This metaphor operates on multiple levels. Firstly, by emphasizing individual strength, discipline, and self-reliance, it implicitly reinforces the importance of individual capabilities within the collective, as exemplified by Stavros*'s admiration for the first generation's ability to 'fight alone.' This focus on individual strength, however, can overshadow the need for interdependence and shared responsibility within a collective leadership model.

Secondly, the 'soldier' image creates an idealized model of unwavering dedication and loyalty, aligning with the traits approach's focus on exemplary leadership. However, this ideal becomes a source of pressure for the second generation, who struggle to balance church, career, and family, as illustrated by Pantelis*'s discomfort with the metaphor's implication of detachment from real-life struggles (3.2.3). This pressure arises because the metaphor implies a single-minded focus on the 'mission,' potentially neglecting the legitimate demands of other life commitments. This struggle highlights the trait approach's neglect of situational factors, further underscored by Elias*'s disappointment in the second generation's perceived inability to fully embody the 'soldier' ideal.

Thirdly, the 'soldier' metaphor's inherent focus on mission accomplishment can overshadow the internal dynamics of leadership. The first-generation elders emphasized individual exemplarity and a strong sense of collective intent—a shared desire to fulfill the church's mission. However, they failed to cultivate collaborative practices—the skills and structures necessary for effective teamwork—leaving the second generation ill-equipped to share leadership effectively. This distinction between intent and practice is crucial. While the first generation shared a common goal, they lacked the skills and structures to work together effectively, a deficiency they inadvertently passed on to the next generation. Neofytos*'s frustration with the lack of 'ownership' in collective decisions (3.2.3) exemplifies this challenge, revealing the difficulty of translating strong individual traits into effective collective action. Thus, the 'soldier' image, while seemingly promoting unity, ultimately reinforces the tension between individual traits and collective leadership at GMBC.

The ethnographic data from GMBC, therefore, suggests that effective leadership is not solely determined by possessing a single, predetermined set of traits. The second generation's emphasis on “shared learning,” the awareness of human brokenness and vulnerability, as illustrated by Kyriakos*'s "sheep leading sheep" metaphor and Stavros*'s emphasis on collective growth through shared limitations (3.2.5), points towards an understanding of the *plurality* of traits required for effective leadership. While the first generation prioritized traits like individual strength and unwavering dedication, as embodied in the "soldier" image, the second generation

highlights the additional importance of adaptability, relational dynamics, and a willingness to embrace limitations. This suggests that effective collective leadership requires a broader range of traits, encompassing both individual strengths and collaborative qualities.

5.1.2 Paternalistic Leadership: Benevolent Authority and Confucian Echoes

The paternalistic leadership model can be situated within the broader context of the cultural/cross-cultural turn in leadership research. This turn recognizes the increasing opportunities and challenges presented to leadership by increasingly frequent international interactions and the growing cultural diversity within organizations.³³⁵ It emphasizes that cultural attentiveness is not just a "nice-to-have" but a critical perspective for effective leadership in today's interconnected world.

Interest in the paternalistic leadership model originated from attempts to understand leadership within Chinese cultural contexts. Farh and Cheng identify three core components: authoritarianism, benevolence, and morality. This model involves a dynamic interplay between strong, disciplinary authority, known as *li-wei* (立威), and holistic, fatherly care, or *shi-en* (施恩). Crucially, this benevolent dimension is not a modern concession to Western ideals of a "nurturing home," but is an indigenous concept rooted in the Confucian ideal of the "kind father" (慈父) and the social logic of reciprocity (*bao* 報).³³⁶ While traditional models relied heavily on authority, recent studies suggest that modernization has weakened the effectiveness of pure authoritarianism, making benevolence and moral integrity increasingly essential for earning subordinate loyalty and compliance in contemporary settings.³³⁷ It is crucial

³³⁵ Yukl and Gardner, *Leadership in Organizations*, 370; Northouse, *Leadership*, 427; Antonakis and Day, *The Nature of Leadership*, 6. Den Hartog and Dickson "Leadership, Culture and Globalization." in Antonakis, J., & Day, D. V. (Eds.). (2017). *The Nature of Leadership* 327-353.

³³⁶ Jiing-Lih Farh and Bor-Shiuan Cheng, "A Cultural Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership in Chinese Organizations," in *Management and Organizations in the Chinese Context*, ed. J. T. Li, Anne S. Tsui, and Elizabeth Weldon (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000), 94–127.

³³⁷ Bor-Shiuan Cheng et al., "Paternalistic Leadership and Subordinate Responses: Establishing a Leadership Model in Chinese Organizations," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 7 (2004): 89–117.

to note, however, that the very term 'paternalistic' reveals an inherent gender bias within the model itself, focusing on the 'pater' or father figure while often leaving the corresponding maternal role theoretically unexamined and practically invisible.

This interpretation of leadership structure and dynamics resonates with analyses of traditional Chinese society, as evidenced by Fei Xiaotong's use of the term "paternalism" to understand Chinese community structure in his seminal 1948 work.³³⁸ Extensive scholarly research and ecclesial literature indicate the prevalence of a paternalistic style within Chinese church communities. Historically, this style has fueled significant growth in Chinese churches, but also generated controversy and authoritarianism, marked by unquestioned leader authority and suppressed follower autonomy.³³⁹

Paternalistic leadership, characterized by its interplay of authority, benevolence, and moral leadership, offers a culturally relevant framework for understanding GMBC's leadership dynamics.³⁴⁰ This model, often found in contexts influenced by Confucianism, resonates with the first generation's approach. This section analyses how this paternalistic style, despite not being explicitly acknowledged, shaped GMBC's early leadership and contributed to the challenges faced by the second generation.

Examining GMBC's leadership through the lens of paternalistic leadership reveals a nuanced picture of the power dynamics. While the first generation of leaders formally rejected a hierarchical structure, their practices and narratives reveal a subtle yet

³³⁸ See Fei Xiaotong, *From the Soil, the Foundations of Chinese Society: A Translation of Fei Xiaotong's Xiangtu Zhongguo, with an Introduction and Epilogue*, contributed by Gary G. Hamilton and Zheng Wang (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

³³⁹ For instance, Karrie Koesel attributes the rapid growth of Chinese house churches in the 1980s to their utilization of paternalistic leadership as a powerful "organizational weapon". See Karrie J. Koesel, "The Rise of a Chinese House Church: The Organizational Weapon," *The China Quarterly* no. 215 (2013):572-89.

³⁴⁰ Referring to the discussion in literature review. See also, Jiing-Lih Farh and Bor-Shiuan Cheng, "A Cultural Analysis of Paternalistic Leadership in Chinese Organizations," in *Management and Organizations in the Chinese Context*, ed. J. T. Li, Anne S. Tsui, and Elizabeth Weldon (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2000). Bor-Shiuan Cheng et al., "Paternalistic Leadership and Subordinate Responses: Establishing a Leadership Model in Chinese Organizations," *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 7 (2004): 90.

effective form of the paternalistic, "benevolent authority". Vasilios*, the "hidden commander," embodied this dynamic, subtly guiding decisions and maintaining coherence while fostering a sense of trust and respect (3.2.4). This aligns with the Confucian foundations of this leadership style, where the leader's authority is not based on coercion but on a combination of competence, moral integrity, and genuine concern for the well-being of those under their care. The first generation's emphasis on benevolence manifested in their dedication to congregational needs, providing support, guidance, and resources, especially to "Hong Kong drifters." As discussed in the previous chapter, their successful use of "family" as a conduit for Christian values and exemplary behaviour also positioned them as parental figures, fostering a paternalistic dynamic implicitly accepted by their followers. In essence, this implicit paternalistic leadership mechanism underpinned GMBC's early leadership operations. This dynamic, however, was deeply gendered; the founders' critique of the powerful "father" role did not extend to a critique of the implicit "mother" or supportive spouse role, revealing an unexamined assumption about domestic and ecclesial labor that the paternalistic leadership model itself often perpetuates.

Furthermore, a paternalistic leadership lens clarifies the challenges faced by the second generation. First, as Michail*, Gavriil*, and Kyriakos* noted (3.2.3), their relative youth compared to many congregants made assuming a naturally authoritative, paternal role difficult. Second, family responsibilities and personal pressures hindered their ability to provide the sense of authoritarian protection their followers expected. Moreover, the absence of a central authority figure like Vasilios*, who organically combined authority, benevolence, and integrity, thereby inspiring implicit deference, noticeably increased the cost of reaching consensus within the leadership team, impacting operational efficiency. Although not explicitly framed in these theoretical terms, Neofytos*'s call to "return to a senior pastor model" (3.2.5) and embrace singular authority directly addresses this perceived deficiency.

These findings highlight a critical discrepancy: the first generation's practiced paternalism, particularly as embodied by Vasilios*, seemingly contradicted their espoused value of collective leadership. The "Soldiers of Christ" image seems to cover the contradiction. While seemingly emphasising collective action and shared

responsibility, this image also carries implicit hierarchical connotations, with its commander-soldier dynamic. This allowed Vasilios* to exercise a subtle form of "benevolent authority," guiding decisions and maintaining coherence while formally adhering to the written principles of the collective leadership.

Therefore, the "collective leadership" model, which resonates with espoused values of equality in both "the priesthood of all believers" tradition and contemporary organizations, is further legitimized within this Hong Kong-based faith community by the biblical image of "Soldiers of Christ." However, its underlying operational mechanism reflects deeply ingrained Confucian cultural underpinnings, aligning with a paternalistic leadership perspective. This specific model in GMBC, therefore, traverses multiple layers of faith and cultural influence. This implicit and subtle paternalistic approach, operating under the guise of collective leadership, created a gap between the first generation's practice and the second generation's understanding. It is important to note that Vasilios*'s approach should be viewed not as deliberate deception, but as an adaptation to GMBC's complex realities. He balanced the church's stated commitment to collective leadership with deeply ingrained Confucian cultural values and the practical demands of leading a diaspora community. Nevertheless, the resulting discrepancy, rooted in the first generation's discomfort with vulnerability and the second generation's desire for deeper connection, underscores the need for a new leadership model that integrates collective responsibility with second-generation values while addressing the practical demands of church leadership.

5.1.3 Shared Leadership: Bridging the Gap Between Ideal and Reality

Given the increasing importance of teamwork and collaboration in modern organizations, shared leadership (also known as collective or collaborative leadership) has become a growing focus of leadership research. This theory offers an alternative to traditional models emphasizing individual traits and vertical hierarchies, defining leadership as "an informal emergent and dynamic team phenomenon whereby leadership roles and influence are distributed among team

members".³⁴¹ Scholars such as Michael Kocolowski advocate for this decentralized approach, contending that shared leadership offers a potential solution by distributing responsibilities and leveraging diverse team skills. He highlights potential advantages including improved decision-making, reduced stress on individual leaders, and enhanced team performance.³⁴²

However, by 2010, Kocolowski still acknowledged that, "while shared leadership has been practiced in some form for centuries, research on the subject is still in its infancy,"³⁴³ because its practical implementation is far more complex than its intuitive ideal. This leadership model has also become a prominent topic in organizational research, with recent studies exploring its applicability, measurement, and particularly, its practical limitations.³⁴⁴ Notably, Evans et al. offer an examination of the individual-level consequences of holding a shared leadership schema.³⁴⁵ They argue that while such a schema can facilitate shared leadership within a team, it can also lead to "unshared burdens" for individuals, a point particularly relevant to the present study.

The term "shared" in this leadership model aligns particularly well with GMBC's espoused ideals of decentralization and "leading together" within their "collective leadership" framework. However, applying this lens reveals significant discrepancies between theory and practice. This section examines how the first generation's approach, while incorporating elements of shared leadership, deviated from key principles, creating challenges for the second generation as they attempted to implement a more genuinely shared approach.

³⁴¹ L. D'Innocenzo, J. E. Mathieu, and M. R. Kukenberger, "A Meta-Analysis of Different Forms of Shared Leadership–Team Performance Relations," *Journal of Management* 42, no. 7 (2016): 1964–91.

³⁴² Michael D. Kocolowski, "Shared Leadership: Is it Time for a Change?" *Emerging Leadership Journeys* 3, no. 1 (2010): 22–32.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 22.

³⁴⁴ Christos N. Pitelis and Joachim D. Wagner, "Strategic Shared Leadership and Organizational Dynamic Capabilities," *The Leadership Quarterly* 30 (2019): 233–42; Alexandra (Sasha) Cook, Alexander Zill, and Bertolt Meyer, "Observing Leadership as Behavior in Teams and Herds – An Ethological Approach to Shared Leadership Research," *The Leadership Quarterly* 31 (2020): 101296.

³⁴⁵ Karoline Evans, Bret Sanner, and Chia-Yen (Chad) Chiu, "Shared Leadership, Unshared Burdens: How Shared Leadership Structure Schema Lowers Individual Enjoyment Without Increasing Performance," *Group & Organization Management*, (2021): 1–46.

The first-generation elders benefited from certain shared leadership elements, primarily their strong, shared mission of evangelism and collaborative, albeit purpose-driven, approach. Distributing responsibilities leveraged their diverse skills and experiences, while their shared purpose fuelled dedication and coordinated efforts, contributing to the church's initial success. However, this "collective leadership" deviated from the shared leadership ideal. While responsibilities were distributed, a "hidden" power inequality existed, contrasting with the equitable participation expected in shared leadership. Furthermore, their "comrades-in-arms" dynamic, prioritising mission accomplishment, neglected the cultivation of robust interpersonal relationships, and consequently triggered internal conflicts. This dynamic, while effective initially, fostered a task-oriented approach to leadership, neglecting the relational aspects crucial for long-term team cohesion.

The dynamic was further reinforced by the "Soldiers of Christ" metaphor, which, while not explicitly linked to shared leadership, implicitly promoted a hierarchical structure and an emphasis on individual strength and unwavering dedication, rather than interdependence and vulnerability. While the first generation benefited from a shared mission and collaborative approach, their "comrades-in-arms" dynamic, prioritizing mission accomplishment, neglected crucial relational aspects of shared leadership. Kocolowski, citing Carson et al., emphasizes the importance of freely expressing individual perspectives for effective shared leadership.³⁴⁶ Furthermore, as Wood notes, emotional support is key to shared leadership.³⁴⁷ However, the first generation's emphasis on unity and efficiency may have hindered open communication about disagreements, creating relational fractures. In addition, their focus on achieving shared goals may have neglected the emotional well-being of team members, evident in Michail*'s yearning for "organic" relationships.

In contrast, unaware of the actual power dynamics within the first generation's

³⁴⁶ Kocolowski, "Shared Leadership," 24. See also, J. B. Carson, P. E. Tesluk, and J. A. Marrone, "Shared Leadership in Teams: An Investigation of Antecedent Conditions and Performance," *Academy of Management Journal* 50, no. 5 (2007): 1217–34.

³⁴⁷ Kocolowski, "Shared Leadership," 24. See also, M. Wood, "Determinants of Shared Leadership in Management Teams," *International Journal of Leadership Studies* 1, no. 1 (2005): 64–85.

leadership, the second generation, by literally inheriting the espoused "collective leadership" model, inadvertently practiced a genuine egalitarian approach more closely aligned with theoretical shared leadership. However, the second-generation elders at GMBC faced significant challenges implementing shared leadership, just mirroring critiques of the model. The absence of an influential leader like Vasilios* diffused the responsibilities, hindering decision-making and creating inefficient meetings. As a result, these elders felt overwhelmed, "stretched thin" between work, family, and increased church responsibilities.

This experience aligns with Evans et al.'s findings that individuals with a strong shared leadership schema often assume excessive interpersonal responsibilities, decreasing individual well-being and potentially leading to emotional exhaustion. Reflected from the interviews, the second generation expresses palpable frustration stemming from diminished personal accomplishment. Statements like Michail*'s regarding the need to "adapt," "adjust," "sacrifice," and "compromise" highlight their constant tension and suggest emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, unlike the first generation's purpose-driven collaboration, the second generation resents the increased frequency and inefficiency of meetings. Michail*'s complaints about inadequate preparation (3.2.3) and Neofytos*'s frustration with the "indifference" of other elders (3.2.3) indicate growing disillusionment with the collective leadership process. This disillusionment is coupled with a decline in motivation compared to the founders. The diffused responsibility inherent in the collective leadership model, compounded by the lack of a clear vision and the pressure of the "soldier" ideal, fosters apathy and diminishes ownership. Consequently, Neofytos* and Ioannis* question the efficacy of collective leadership (3.2.5), with Neofytos* asserting that "leadership cannot be shared" (3.2.3).

The critical assessment of shared leadership by Evans et al. helps explain the second generation's frustration and burnout, despite their closer adherence to its ideals.³⁴⁸ Evans et al. highlight the potential for "unshared burdens," particularly "interpersonal responsibility overload," which increases communication costs and

³⁴⁸ Evans, et al, "Shared Leadership, Unshared Burdens," 15.

emotional labor for team members. These burdens are often invisible and unrewarded, especially in a culture emphasizing self-discipline like GMBC. This lack of recognition is compounded by the second generation's more nuanced, less easily measurable understanding of church success, unlike the first generation's focus on quantifiable growth. Furthermore, the collective model itself, by limiting individual autonomy, restricts the potential for personal accomplishment, exacerbating frustration. This raises a crucial question: while the current model creates its own challenges, would incentivizing individual power and autonomy within church leadership be even more risky?

Indeed, these unpaid lay leaders at GMBC find profound reward and enjoyment in their faith itself, rather than autonomy, power, or even recognition. Despite the challenges, the second generation demonstrates not apathy but active exploration, even nascent attempts to transform the leadership model. Stavros*'s description of the second-generation elders as a "group" with individual deficiencies contributing collectively (3.2.5) suggests a burgeoning awareness of interdependence. Stavros*'s emphasis on collective learning and acknowledging limitations further indicates a shift away from the individualistic "soldier" mentality. Michail*'s desire for "private, personal connections" and critique of the current meeting structure as resembling a "typical company meeting" (3.2.3) reveals a yearning for a more relational, less transactional approach. Kyriakos*'s "sheep leading sheep" metaphor, while nascent, suggests movement toward a more egalitarian and shared understanding of leadership, emphasizing shared identity and potentially fostering collective ownership and responsibility.

However, these emerging ideas and nascent images have yet to coalesce into a counter-narrative capable of supplanting the prevailing "soldier" image. This indicates the need for a robust theological framework to provide a foundation within their faith for reorienting individuals within the team and the church congregation. This framework, rather than being a perfect leadership handbook, should foster trust and relationships based on shared faith and enjoyment, thereby empowering them to proactively develop and implement more effective feedback mechanisms or clearer task delegation.

However, such theological renewal is not without its challenges. The preceding analysis, applying organizational leadership theories to GMBC, reveals a key tension: the disconnect between idealized leadership images and the realities of shared practice. Cultivating a more sustainable model requires a critical examination of romanticized leadership narratives and a shift in mindset. Therefore, the following analysis will begin by examining the deeply embedded "soldiers of Christ" metaphor to reflect the established assumptions about leadership and facilitate transformation.

5.2 Reflecting The “Soldiers of Christ” Image: A Missiological/Historical Reflection

The "Soldier of Christ" metaphor, while having biblical roots, has been deployed throughout Christian history in ways that often intertwine faith with militaristic and expansionist ideologies. This section examines how this metaphor has been utilized within two distinct missionary contexts—Western missionary movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the modern Pentecostal movement—to better understand its influence within GMBC. By analysing these historical uses of military metaphors (sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2) through a missiological lens, highlighting their similarities and differences, we can critically assess the implications of the "Soldier of Christ" image for GMBC's leadership and its potential impact on the church's mission and identity. This analysis will then inform a deeper theological reflection on the role and implications of this metaphor within GMBC's specific leadership narratives (section 5.2.3), particularly its potential tension with the church's stated commitment to shared leadership.

5.2.1 Western Missionary Movements: Military Metaphors and the Legacy of Colonialism

Many theologians acknowledge that the Christian discourse often employs military metaphors and language derived from Biblical texts, particularly the Pauline epistles, including the "soldiers of Christ" image.³⁴⁹ Guelich underscores the further

³⁴⁹ 2 Timothy 2:3

development of the metaphor's historical deployment in Christianity, citing its use by Constantine for political purposes and its role in justifying the Crusades.³⁵⁰ He further traces its presence in Protestant hymnody, from Luther's "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" to later gospel songs like "Onward Christian Soldiers," demonstrating the continued use of this militaristic terminology. However, fueled by the Enlightenment's emphasis on reason and progress, the surge in Western overseas missionary movements during the 18th and 19th centuries further amplified this military language.

According to Bosch, a new global awareness, along with a belief in the West's cultural and religious superiority, motivated Christians to spread the Gospel and what they saw as "civilisation" to distant lands.³⁵¹ This era saw the rise of voluntary missionary societies driven by both religious fervour and national pride, as individuals and denominations sought to convert the "poor heathen" and hasten the millennium. While some missionaries showed genuine compassion and worked against colonial injustices, the movement as a whole became linked with Western expansion, promoting a mix of Christianity, commerce, and culture. This period was characterized by an optimistic belief in Christianity's inevitable triumph, supported by technological advancements and a pragmatic approach to evangelism, yet it was also marked by growing denominationalism and debates over the proper relationship between the Gospel and culture.

Within the Western-centric missionary movement, the 1910 Edinburgh World Missionary Conference represents a "high point".³⁵² Bosch observes that the conference exhibited an optimistic and urgent approach to global missions: "The mood at Edinburgh was futurist rather than eschatological. The future was primarily seen as an extension of the present." Bosch further notes the conference's use of military language:

³⁵⁰ Robert A. Guelich, "Spiritual Warfare: Jesus, Paul and Peretti," *Pneuma* 13, no. 1 (1991): 33–64.

³⁵¹ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 209.

³⁵² Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement from the West: A Biography from Birth to Old Age* (Chicago: W. B. Eerdmans, 2023), 192.

Western mission was an undisputed power. Mission stood in the sign of world conquest. Missionaries were referred to as “soldiers,” as Christian “forces.” References were made to missionary strategies and tactical plans. Military metaphors such as “army,” “crusade,” “council of war,” “conquest,” “advance,” “resources,” and “marching orders” abounded. All circumstances added up to the recognition of the fact that the present moment was a mandate for mission; it was “an opportune time,” “a critical time,” “a testing time for the church,” “a decisive hour for the Christian mission”.³⁵³

Within this atmosphere, the original emphasis in 2 Timothy on the suffering and discipline of "soldiers" demonstrably shifted toward connotations of conquest.

The legacy of militaristic language

While GMBC does not have a direct genealogical link to the Western missionary movements of the colonial era, examining their use of military metaphors provides a crucial critical-missiological lens. The purpose of this analysis is not to suggest a direct inheritance of ideology, but rather to deconstruct the potential theological pitfalls—such as triumphalism and cultural superiority—that can become attached to the "Soldier of Christ" metaphor, regardless of its context. This Western case study serves as a powerful illustration of these risks.

This militaristic mindset is inextricably linked to the long-standing entanglement of mission and Western colonialism. Indeed, as Bosch points out, the term "mission" itself, derived from the commissioning of religious agents, became intertwined with the colonial era, implying a mandate from a European institution to convert overseas populations. While missionaries occasionally challenged colonial injustices, they often became complicit in colonial projects, subtly reinforcing Western hegemony. To be sure, scholars like Walls attempt to distinguish between the missionary and crusader mindset: “The crusader may invite, but in the end, he is prepared to compel. The missionary cannot compel; the missionary can only demonstrate, explain, entreat—and leave the rest to God.”³⁵⁴ But the aggressive military language and metaphors prevalent in Western missionary narratives often resemble the

³⁵³ David J. Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 256, referring to I. P. C. van 't Hof, *Op zoek naar het geheim van de zending: In dialoog met de wereldzendingconferenties 1910–1963* (Wageningen: Veenman, 1972).

³⁵⁴ Walls, *The Missionary Movement*, 10.

former.

Reflecting on this history reveals an ambition for expansion and conquest within "non-Christian" territories, legitimized as a noble mission through the adoption of Christian military language. This implies a potential distortion of the gospel in the Western missionary discourse, as Walls observes: "Perhaps the military language that was common at the time of occupation helped to disable them from remembering that Christian history from the first century onward suggests that there are no permanently Christian lands."³⁵⁵ The Edinburgh Conference concluded with the militaristic slogan, "The end of the Conference is the beginning of the conquest."³⁵⁶ However, this aggressive enthusiasm was quickly shattered by the First World War. As Walls observes, the global spread of Christianity has unfolded in ways unforeseen by the organizers of the Edinburgh conference. The rise of vibrant Christian communities in Asia and Africa, initially marginalized within the Western-dominated missionary movement, has not only reshaped Christianity into a predominantly non-Western faith, but also prompted a re-evaluation of the very concept of "mission."

Correlations to GMBC

Examining GMBC's 'soldiers of Christ' image through this critical lens offers valuable insights. First, while Western missions primarily targeted geographical territories and "unreached peoples" within a colonial context—a context absent in GMBC—the first-generation founders shared a comparable focus on evangelizing China, particularly the mainland. Like Western missions, GMBC's founders prioritized conversion and outward expansion, aiming to "win souls" within the Mandarin-speaking community. This focus on expansion and numerical growth, especially championed by Elias*, explains their resistance to the second generation's emphasis on local integration in Hong Kong, potentially leading to cultural insensitivity and neglecting the needs of existing members. To the founders, a grand, optimistic vision of "evangelizing China," akin to the Edinburgh Conference's missiological worldview, plays a crucial role in inspiring the congregation and fostering group cohesion. This vision, in a

³⁵⁵ Ibid., 202.

³⁵⁶ Ibid., 204.

manner that unconsciously parallels the triumphalism critiqued in the Western missiological worldview, plays a crucial role in inspiring the congregation

Second, the sense of superiority often intertwined with Western missions finds an analogue in GMBC's founders, not based on race or culture, but on professional success. This superiority allowed them to position themselves as "teachers" and "givers" to "Hong Kong drifters," hindering their willingness to acknowledge personal needs and rely on others, and even impeding deeper, emotional connections with the congregation and wider community in Hong Kong compared to the second generation.

The stark contrast between the confident exuberance of Western Christianity at the Edinburgh Conference and its subsequent decline might also offer valuable lessons for GMBC. As the optimism fueled by a sense of superiority waned, leading Western churches experienced a deconstruction of their established understanding of Christianity and their own identity. However, this humbling process allowed marginalized cultures and communities to express their perspectives on faith, prompting a reassessment of mission and the gospel within global Christianity. While applying this historical trajectory to GMBC might seem overly grand, it offers relevant insights. GMBC has witnessed a similar experience with the first generation's ambitious vision and optimism encountering setbacks. Meanwhile, the initially marginalized second-generation leaders continue to navigate an uncertain future. This presents a crucial opportunity for GMBC's leadership and the entire congregation to re-evaluate their understanding of faith. While images like "soldiers of Christ" contribute to identity formation, they can also become limiting.

A key takeaway from the history of Western missions is the crucial importance of humbly relinquishing not only overt markers of cultural superiority, such as language or customs, but also more subtle yet deeply influential preconceived notions of the future. Traditional Western missions operated with an implicit, if not explicit, "conquest" mentality, driven by a linear, progressive view of history culminating in the triumph of Christendom. This mindset often led to a disregard for the present realities and diversity of communities, viewing them primarily as objects of conversion. This

concern is not exclusive to Western churches but also manifests in conversion-driven evangelism, often prioritized within many Chinese evangelical communities,³⁵⁷ probably including GMBC. A truly humble approach to missions requires the Church to critically examine these triumphalist narratives—not only culturally (East and West) but also theologically and practically.

5.2.2 Expanding the Vision: Military Metaphors in Broader Christian Contexts

Unlike Western missions, which employed military metaphors to describe their engagement with geographical territories and "unreached peoples," militaristic metaphors developed differently in other Christian traditions, notably with the rise of the "Spiritual Warfare" movement within Pentecostal and Charismatic circles. While seemingly genealogically unrelated to GMBC, a closer analysis of the underlying ideology of this movement offers valuable lessons for Chinese evangelical communities, particularly in terms of "reparative thinking" and a spirit of "faith seeking collaboration."

Pentecostal theologian Janet Warren notes the increasing prevalence of militaristic terminology alongside the rise of the charismatic renewal movement, citing Michael Harper's 1970 book *Spiritual Warfare* as a key moment in its popularization.³⁵⁸ From its Pentecostal origins, interest in "spiritual warfare" spread to other evangelical branches in the 1980s, blurring denominational lines and becoming the dominant framework for discussing encounters with the evil forces (including evil spirits) in contemporary Western Christianity. This mindset is particularly influential within Evangelical and Pentecostal circles. As Ben Pugh identifies, "conquering evil forces" constitutes one of the key ideas of Charismatic Christianity.³⁵⁹

Pugh notes that the spiritual warfare worldview constructs a reality where believers are engaged in a constant struggle against the devil, demons, and other malevolent

³⁵⁷ As Fenggang Yang notes, evangelism is considered "*The Mission*" (emphasis original) by many North American Chinese churches. See, Yang, *Chinese Christians in America*, 67.

³⁵⁸ Janet E. Warren, "'Spiritual Warfare': A Dead Metaphor?" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 21 (2012): 288.

³⁵⁹ Ben Pugh, *Bold Faith: A Closer Look at the Five Key Ideas of Charismatic Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 87-105.

spiritual entities.³⁶⁰ Everyday struggles, such as illness, misfortune, and temptation, are interpreted as manifestations of this spiritual battle. Victory comes through spiritual discipline, prayer, and the exercise of spiritual authority. Pugh observes that this desire for victory represents a reaction against what he perceives as the "powerless intellectualism" of mainstream Western Christianity, advocating instead for a worldview that embraces the supernatural realm.³⁶¹

Pugh further notes that, while this worldview, unlike that of Western missionaries, does not target non-Christian populations or geographical territories for conquest, it envisions a hierarchical system of evil spirits transcending the earthly sphere as the objects of conquest. Thus, while employing militaristic language, this perspective focuses on conquering supernatural entities in the spiritual realm and views certain physical spaces in daily Christian life, such as nearby secular urban spaces, as "territorial strongholds" of evil awaiting conquest. Pugh suggests this concept originates from the overseas missionary experiences of early proponents like Peter Wagner.³⁶² Despite apparent differences from Western missionary discourse, this framework reveals underlying continuity and similarities, including a dualistic worldview that "demonizes," or at least objectifies, the other (as an object of mission). It also fosters a triumphalist mindset, leveraging an emphasis on conquest to mobilize adherents toward aggressive actions, despite manifesting differently from Western missionary traditions.

A key insight from examining the Pentecostal use of military metaphors is its impact on church leadership. Unlike Western missionary movements, these Pentecostal groups are more localized and indigenized, with many transitioning from movements into established ministerial practices. Pugh's research indicates that this mindset carries distinct leadership implications, elevating individuals perceived as possessing unique powers to perceive and interact with the spiritual realm—often charismatic leaders like Wagner or John Wimber — to positions of crucial importance within the

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Pugh, *Bold Faith*, 91.

³⁶² Pugh, *Bold Faith*, 91n20.

movement.³⁶³ This leadership model, emphasizing "supernatural abilities," also appears and evolves within many subsequent local Christian communities.

To take one example, Gukurume and Taru's ethnographic research on Southern African Pentecostal Charismatic Churches (PCCs) in Zimbabwe highlights the pervasive use of the "soldiers in God's army" metaphor. This metaphor reframes Christian faith and life through the lens of spiritual warfare, evident in various aspects of church life, including sermon language, rituals, and leadership structures, demonstrating another embodiment of military metaphors within lived Christian experience.³⁶⁴ They observed that PCCs systematically adopt military hierarchies, formally bestowing titles like "spiritual commanders" or "generals" in God's army upon various levels of church leadership. This reinforces leaders' authority and demands member loyalty, while potentially creating a hierarchical structure characterized by unquestioning obedience.³⁶⁵

However, as Gukurume and Taru note, while this hierarchical structure fosters a strong sense of community and shared identity, empowering individuals and communities with purpose and agency amid adversity, and even offering stability in volatile contexts like Zimbabwe, it also raises concerns about the suppression of dissent and the potential for abuse of power. For instance, the authors observe instances where leaders instructed congregations to reject public health measures during the COVID-19 pandemic for spiritual reasons.³⁶⁶ In analyzing this military metaphor and its associated narratives, Warren connects it to a "combat myth" frequently portraying a hero who invariably defeats the enemy through violence.³⁶⁷ Warren is concerned that this model can lead to the externalization of problems and the absolutization of enemies, thereby minimizing personal responsibility for sin and inner transformation by focusing on external battles.³⁶⁸ A further concern for Warren

³⁶³ Ibid., 89-91.

³⁶⁴ Simbarashe Gukurume and Josiah Taru, "'We Are Soldiers in God's Army': Spiritual Warfare and Adoption of Military Trope in Pentecostal Charismatic Churches in Southern Africa," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 50 (2020): 278–98.

³⁶⁵ Ibid., 279.

³⁶⁶ Gukurume and Taru, "'We Are Soldiers in God's Army,'" 288.

³⁶⁷ Warren, 292.

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 291.

is that this "warfare" metaphor is "primarily masculine", potentially alienating women and children, "especially if they have experienced violence".³⁶⁹

5.2.3 The "Soldier of Christ": A Critical Reassessment

While GMBC does not explicitly embrace the "spiritual warfare framework," the preceding analysis of broader Pentecostal discourse offers valuable lessons for GMBC leadership. The emphasis on discipline, strength, and fighting for the faith echoes the language of spiritual combat. Furthermore, the heightened emphasis on "soldiers" and "military camp" imagery following the loss of their meeting space suggests a subtle form of territorial thinking, a desire to "conquer" and "defend" their space within Hong Kong. Although GMBC's emphasis on rationality and reasoning tempers the more supernatural aspects of spiritual warfare, it shapes a potentially disenchanted and even incoherent form of military engagement. This engagement, focusing on overcoming internal and external obstacles, is particularly embodied in the self-image of first-generation leaders—whom Stavros* perceived as capable, exceptional, and able to "fight alone"—and echoes Warren's heroic "combat myth." Therefore, it is unsurprising that a sustained state of "war" for individuals and the group could lead to fatigue and burnout. Finally, while GMBC's emphasis on collective leadership has largely avoided issues of unchecked power and the "superhero" narrative, the prioritization of evangelism under this "wartime policy" has sidelined important concerns, such as female leadership.

These issues necessitate further examination of military metaphors within a broader sociocultural context, as exemplified by Iona Francesca Walker's critical analysis of such language regarding antimicrobial resistance and the COVID-19 pandemic in the United Kingdom.³⁷⁰ Walker emphasizes that while such metaphors in medical contexts are "effective at communicating risk and urgency and at mobilizing resources," they also "collapse diverse interests and communities into 'fronts,'" leading to an oversimplification of the lived experience and specific needs of diverse

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 292.

³⁷⁰ Iona Francesca Walker, "Beyond the Military Metaphor: Comparing Antimicrobial Resistance and the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United Kingdom," *Medicine Anthropology Theory* 7, no. 2 (2020): 261–72.

groups.³⁷¹

Walker's argument resonates with John Swinton's concerns regarding the use of military metaphors in mental health contexts. Swinton highlights how phrases like "battling schizophrenia," "wrestling with bipolar disorder," or "fighting depression" frame mental health challenges as wars requiring victory, which carries numerous consequences.³⁷² Swinton emphasizes that this simplistic win/lose scenario not only obscures the complex and ongoing nature of recovery, but also suggests that anything less than complete victory constitutes failure. This can be incredibly discouraging, potentially leading to self-rejection rather than self-acceptance and integration.³⁷³ While the contexts differ, both Walker and Swinton's focus resonates with church leadership narratives. Church leadership, like recovery, is a long-term, complex, and fluctuating process without a single, definitive "victory." It requires a sustained engagement with ongoing challenges. Therefore, an overemphasis on warfare and triumphalism can lead to discouragement and a sense of failure when setbacks inevitably occur, diminishing the enjoyment of leadership work. This is visible in GMBC's second-generation leaders.

The "Soldier of Christ" metaphor also carries significant gender implications. Drawing on scholarship that identifies such military imagery as overwhelmingly masculine,³⁷⁴ this metaphor frames leadership through traditionally male qualities like combat and command. This gendering of leadership implicitly reinforces the all-male elder board by creating a conceptual framework where leadership becomes synonymous with a form of spiritual masculinity. Consequently, the decision to "sidestep" female leaders appears less a pragmatic choice and more a natural outcome of a theological imagination shaped by this masculine ideal.

Given these critiques, the evaluation and treatment of military metaphors vary. Concerned about the overuse of such language, Warren argues that warfare

³⁷¹ Ibid., 261, 265.

³⁷² John Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm*, 3-5.

³⁷³ Ibid.

³⁷⁴ Janet E. Warren, "'Spiritual Warfare': A Dead Metaphor?" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 21 (2012): 292.

terminology "has been so overused that it likely has become a dead metaphor, or a part of conventional language."³⁷⁵ In comparison, Walker's encouragement of a "diversity of language and imaginative framings"³⁷⁶ aligns with Nicolas Adams's "reparative thinking" approach adopted in this study, which advocates for multiple, richer metaphors and frameworks. This suggests that relying solely on the "Soldier of Christ" metaphor may be inadequate for understanding the complexities of leadership at GMBC, particularly its relational dynamics. The limitations of the "soldier" metaphor, especially its potential to overshadow these crucial relational aspects, highlight the need for alternative models. Accordingly, the next section critically engages with Chloe Lynch's deliberately constructed theological concept of "leadership as friendship," which stands in stark contrast to the "soldier" metaphor. My aim here is to stimulate deeper exploration of relational leadership models and to assess the potential and limitations of "friendship" as a framework for fostering a more collaborative and supportive leadership culture within GMBC.³⁷⁷

5.3 Reimagining Leadership: Engaging with Lynch's "Friendship" Model and its Limitations

Examining GMBC's leadership through the lenses of trait, paternalistic, and shared leadership models reveals that the deeply ingrained "Soldier of Christ" metaphor appears to exacerbate existing tensions. This raises the question of how alternative or complementary leadership perspectives might offer a more fruitful approach within GMBC's specific context, particularly by addressing the theological limitations of the soldier image. Chloe Lynch's work *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship*, though arising from a different cultural setting, provides a valuable step for this pursuit.³⁷⁸ Lynch's work is highly relevant to this study for several reasons: her clear articulation

³⁷⁵ Ibid., 298.

³⁷⁶ Walker, "Beyond the Military Metaphor," 271.

³⁷⁷ It is crucial to acknowledge that indigenous Chinese evangelistic movements, such as the revivalist bands of the early 20th century, also utilized militaristic imagery. However, like the Western movements, they do not share a direct genealogical link with GMBC's contemporary diaspora context. A full theological and historical analysis of these vital Chinese movements, with their complex relationship to nationalism and anti-colonialism, warrants its own dedicated study and lies beyond the purview of this chapter.

³⁷⁸ Chloe Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

of the need for robust theological frameworks for leadership; her critique of common church leadership models, particularly "servant leadership"; and her engagement with themes directly relevant to the GMBC data. Furthermore, her analysis of Ray Anderson's theology and her own proposed "friendship" model, emphasizing mutuality and reciprocity, provides a productive continuity and deeper engagement with the analysis of the "home" image in the previous chapter. While I argue that limitations in Lynch's construction, discussed below, prevent "friendship leadership" from being a fully realized solution, it establishes a foundation for further discussion and deeper theological development.

5.3.1 Lynch's Critique of Managerialism and the Need for Theological Grounding

Lynch's practical theology, employing a "prophetic voice", articulates the "pain" caused by the lack of sound theology and the prevalence of managerialism in contemporary church leadership discourse.³⁷⁹ She argues that prioritising efficiency, numerical growth, and individual fulfilment through managerialist principles represents a fundamental departure from the church's theological foundations and its core mission of discipleship and spiritual formation. This shift has painful consequences for modern ecclesial contexts. Specifically, the overreliance on business-oriented management techniques often leads to superficial theological grounding, neglecting the unique Christological and ecclesial roots of church leadership. Furthermore, this managerial focus blurred the church's *telos*, supplanting it with measurable outcomes such as attendance and financial growth, often to the detriment of spiritual development.

The pursuit of theological depth is central to Lynch's project. Despite the abundance of leadership advice in popular Christian literature, Chloe Lynch describes the theological engagement with the topic as a "near-silence".³⁸⁰ While Lynch acknowledges several biblically-based works offering in-depth scriptural analysis and helpful practical insights, she argues these often lack systematic application to

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 11-32.

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 11.

contemporary church leadership.³⁸¹ She critiques the frequent approaches that overly rely on "biblical characters" as models, regarding them with "deep suspicion" due to potential hermeneutical shortcomings, insufficient contextualization, and the risk of anachronism. While focused on the modern context, Lynch rejects simply extracting elements from faith resources to endorse or decorate popular, borrowed business practices.

Lynch argues that the trend toward empirical studies in practical theology has often overshadowed normative theological reflection on leadership.³⁸² Given this, she calls for a systematic theology of leadership that integrates both empirical findings and theological normativity—a crucial point for this study as well. Lynch's analysis exposes the market-driven values of managerialism and their detrimental impact on the church, including the potential for objectification, control, and abuse of power.³⁸³ She also highlights the pastoral implications of this outcome-oriented mindset, arguing that it can lead to leader burnout and emotional harm. This lack of robust theological reflection, Lynch contends, perpetuates the uncritical adoption of secular leadership models and hinders the development of a distinctly Christian approach, exacerbating the pains within the church.³⁸⁴ These pains motivate her call for a prophetic reimagining of ecclesial leadership grounded in the doctrine of incarnation and focused on the church's true *telos*.³⁸⁵

Lynch modestly limits her analysis to Western social and ecclesial contexts. But her observations, particularly regarding the "pains" she describes, resonate strongly with ethnographic data from GMBC. In the highly commercialized context of Hong Kong,

³⁸¹ For instance, Derek Tidball, *Ministry by the Book: New Testament Patterns for Pastoral Leadership* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008); Andrew D. Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1–6* (Leiden: Brill, 1993); Steve Walton, *Leadership and Lifestyle: The Portrait of Paul in the Miletus Speech and 1 Thessalonians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Darin Land, *The Diffusion of Ecclesiastical Authority: Sociological Dimensions of Leadership in the Book of Acts* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008); Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2013).

³⁸² Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership as Friendship*, 21.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 16-23.

³⁸⁴ See *Ibid.*, 6-7, 33.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 17-22, 37-38.

GMBC leaders, especially the second generation, face the dual pressures of managerialism in both their professional and ecclesial lives. The time constraints expressed by several elders echo Lynch's concerns, particularly Michail's description of navigating endless corporate and church meetings. Although Lynch does not directly address militaristic management, GMBC's "soldier" mentality reflects his concerns. This mentality includes control, emotional suppression, and objectifying evangelism. It particularly burdens second-generation leaders.

Lynch also critiques the individualistic focus of managerialism, advocating for a more collaborative approach, which serves as a foundation for her later theological construction, particularly her utilising the metaphor of "friendship". This resonates with the situation at GBMC, highlighting the need for further theological exploration, as simply emphasising "collective" approaches does not automatically mitigate the pitfalls already named.

However, Lynch's critique extends beyond managerialism to encompass leadership theories themselves. She challenges theories that sharply distinguish management and leadership, a stance that represents a more radical position within leadership scholarship.³⁸⁶ This perspective seems to overlook scholarship that presents a more balanced and mutually complementary relationship between management and leadership, differentiating them on various practical levels while acknowledging their overlap. Furthermore, her limited empirical grounding, stemming from a lack of firsthand data, contributes to a somewhat dismissive stance toward leadership theories. Many such theories, even those originating in business contexts, offer valuable insights into group dynamics, power dynamics, and motivation, facilitating beneficial critical reflection on existing practices. Consequently, this underlying dissatisfaction with the ethos of management appears to preclude a more thorough engagement with recent developments in leadership research, potentially limiting the

³⁸⁶ Lynch finds support for this dichotomous perspective in Rost's work. See Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership*, 12-16. However, she seems to selectively overlook the more mainstream perspectives within organisational research presented by Yukl and Northouse, scholars she engages elsewhere in her work. See Yukl and Gardner, *Leadership in Organizations*, 22-23; Northouse, *Leadership*, 16, where Northouse determines that the management and leadership are "overlapped"; especially, Gary Yukl, "Managerial Leadership: A Review of Theory and Research," *Journal of Management* 15, no. 2 (June 1989): 251-89.

practical application of her "friendship" model.

Like Lynch, Volker Kessler critiques the theological superficiality in popular church leadership narratives, identifying two common pitfalls in "biblical leadership" discourse. The first is the presumption that scriptural knowledge alone sufficiently equips church leaders, negating the value of "secular" knowledge. The second involves the superficial application of biblical labels to popular leadership concepts without rigorous critical assessment of their contextual applicability and theological rigor.³⁸⁷ While these pitfalls resonate with Lynch's critique, they also offer a critical perspective on it—suggesting that the current challenges in church leadership narratives arise not only from theological deficiencies but also from insufficient engagement with robust, empirically-based leadership research. In my view, problematic practices in everyday church life often arise not from the overuse of leadership theories, but rather from a dismissal of their insights due to their perceived "secular" presuppositions—a stance that, ironically, reflects a similar sacred-secular dichotomy in Lynch's own theological framework.

While this limitation appears to partially influence Lynch's theological framework, her theology remains inspirational and insightful. The following analysis will critically assess Lynch's framework, exploring its potential benefits and limitations for a Chinese diaspora church navigating the complexities of collective leadership.

5.3.2 From Servant Leadership to Incarnational Friendship: A Theological Shift

Lynch's exploration of leadership models pivots on a crucial theological shift: from a primarily Christological approach centered on servant leadership to a relational framework grounded in incarnational friendship. She begins her innovative discussion by examining servant leadership, a model influential in both Christian narratives and broader public discourse.³⁸⁸ While the image of the servant is frequently attributed to Jesus's portrayal as the "servant king" washing his disciples'

³⁸⁷ Volker Kessler, "Pitfalls in 'Biblical' leadership," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 34, no. 1 (March 14, 2013):5-7.

³⁸⁸ Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership*, 61-72.

feet, Lynch offers a critique of this interpretation. Having examined scholarly debates surrounding relevant New Testament passages in the Gospels and Pauline letters, Lynch argues that while contemporary writers often embrace servanthood as paradigmatic of Christian leadership, certain nuances are frequently overlooked. Lynch argues that interpretations of Jesus as servant often overemphasize heroic self-sacrifice, obscuring other crucial aspects of his leadership.³⁸⁹ Lynch goes on to engage with researchers and practitioners of church leadership, arguing that a one-sided application of the servant image can be problematic, risking a task-focused approach that diminishes personhood and creates power imbalances.

It is noteworthy that the potential problems Lynch identifies with the servant image share parallels with those of the military image discussed in previous parts: both find biblical justification and impressively convey certain essential leadership values, yet both are susceptible to misinterpretation and can be used to legitimize problematic practice within the church. Comparatively, while military language may appear dominant and the servant image submissive, both carry the risk of justifying power imbalances. Thus, Lynch rightly cautions that models based on images offer "likely accounts" of truth rather than definitive definitions. They provide perspectives for grasping and interpreting reality but cannot fully capture its complexity, even when derived directly from Scripture or the example of Jesus himself. Consequently, she contends that while "servant" is a valuable image, it cannot be considered the only definitive representation of Christian leadership.

Through her discussion of servant leadership, Lynch raises a crucial question: if this analogical approach to Christ-like leadership risks becoming imbalanced, particularly by falling into the trap of self-sacrificial, heroic leadership narratives promoted by the "traits models", then what Christological path should inform the development of ecclesial leadership? To address this, Lynch adopts Anderson's approach in *Historical Transcendence and the Reality of God* (discussed in Chapter 4 of this study), grounding ecclesiology in Christ's incarnation and thereby linking the two. Subsequently, Lynch connects the two-fold focus of Anderson's incarnational

³⁸⁹ Ibid., 71-72.

ecclesiology—the kenotic and ek-static aspects—as the very *telos* of the church she so passionately emphasized in her first chapter, manifested as the community life of self-emptying, neighbor-love, participating in Christ's relationship with the Father through the Spirit. Lynch's analysis reaffirms the profound insight and enduring practical relevance of Anderson's understanding of the church.

Given the strengths of Anderson's framework, Lynch finds it too abstract for practical application and takes issue with his assertion of "the church's absolute difference from the world."³⁹⁰ She argues that this difference should not necessitate boundaries between the church and the wider world, seeking to reconcile this with the inclusive nature of friendship. Lynch suggests that the crucial "difference" lies not in separating the church from the world, but in the individual believer's relationship with Christ, expressed through their interactions with others.³⁹¹ Therefore, she turns to the concept of "friendship" to embody the kenotic/ek-static dynamic within church leadership.³⁹² At the heart of her work, where Lynch articulates a theologically informed model of friendship as a means of realizing the *telos* of leadership, she makes a dramatic leap: from the theological framework of Anderson based on Karl Barth to that of Thomas Aquinas based on classical traditions.

Thomas's framework, with its emphasis on *caritas* as *amicital*, provides for Lynch a more robust account of the mutual exchange and transformative power of relationships, which she sees as essential for a truly incarnational understanding of leadership.³⁹³ As Lynch highlights, Thomas, building on Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* (flourishing), argues that true human happiness lies in sharing God's happiness, understood as the eternal, loving friendship of the Trinity.³⁹⁴ This participation in divine happiness is made possible through grace and expressed in mutual benevolence towards God and neighbors. Lynch emphasizes Thomas's focus on the transformative power of this divine-human friendship, which leads to greater likeness to God while simultaneously affirming human distinctiveness.

³⁹⁰ Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership*, 105-6. See also the discussion in the previous chapter of this study.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 105-6.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, 127.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*, 134.

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

However, in attempting to revise Anderson and thereby shifting to the Thomistic tradition, Lynch overlooks a crucial anthropological dimension present in both Anderson's thought and a deeply Protestant commitment to the fallenness of humanity and the definitive, redemptive role of Christ's incarnation. This oversight is not a deficiency in Aquinas's theology, which comprehensively addresses sin and human brokenness, but rather a limitation in Lynch's application of Thomistic friendship to leadership, where she insufficiently integrates these darker aspects of human nature. Her "friendship" approach, by insufficiently engaging with the realities of sin and brokenness within the complexities of leadership dynamics, risks appearing overly romanticized. This constitutes a significant weakness in both her theological framework and leadership model.

Having shifted the theological framework to a Thomistic perspective, Lynch explores the practical implications of friendship through the work of the medieval Cistercian theologian Aelred of Rievaulx, proposing a model of ecclesial leadership centered on reciprocity, vulnerability, and mutual trust.³⁹⁵ She carefully interprets Aelred's argument that the development of friendship constitutes a spiritual practice, a pathway to deeper intimacy with God, culminating in *summa consensio*—a state of complete agreement, profound unity of wills and affections, and shared participation in the divine life.³⁹⁶ This necessitates vulnerability, a willingness to step outside of comfortable roles and risk being seen, known, and even rejected.³⁹⁷

Lynch emphasizes that true friendship involves a gradual process of mutual self-revelation and trust-building, leading to deeper intimacy and understanding.³⁹⁸ It is not just about individual relationships but about fostering a community where the divine-human friendship can be experienced and shared.³⁹⁹ The leader's role is not one of control or authority, but of fostering mutual transformation through love, and

³⁹⁵ Ibid., 139-142, 162-168.

³⁹⁶ Ibid., 140.

³⁹⁷ Ibid., 163-66, 182-83.

³⁹⁸ Ibid., 165-66.

³⁹⁹ Ibid., 161-62, 182.

shared participation in the divine life.⁴⁰⁰ Lynch suggests the concept of "transient roles" to mitigate potential power imbalances, allowing different individuals to exercise leadership in various domains based on their gifts and the needs of the community.⁴⁰¹ Ultimately, Lynch's model connects directly to the *telos* of the church, which she defines as deeper participation in the divine life expressed as neighbor-love. Friendship, as a form of *caritas*, becomes a primary means of achieving this *telos*.⁴⁰²

Lynch's nuanced analysis reveals compelling parallels between Thomas and Anderson: both are Christocentric, emphasizing participation in the divine life; both prioritize love as the essence of friendship; and both recognize the importance of relationality and communal life.⁴⁰³ However, a fundamental difference, clearly reflected in Lynch's analysis, lies in their deeper theological foundations: Thomas ultimately grounds relational fulfillment in the Trinity, while Anderson's discourse consistently presupposes an incarnational theology. Lynch emphasizes this distinction, highlighting that the fundamental *telos* of the church is "participation in the divine life," characterized by the "kenotic/ek-static life of the Son which constitutes the reorientation of humanity to God in Christ"—further expressed as "self emptying neighbor-love in the context of the Son's ek-static movement of love towards the Father."⁴⁰⁴ Whereas Lynch, citing Paul J. Wadell, unpacks Thomas's concept of the eternal friendship and love between Father and Son—"that exemplar generosity which begets Spirit . . . where love offered is love wholly received and wholly returned"⁴⁰⁵—she posits the *telos* or fullness of humanity as sharing in God's happiness, a gift communicated by God.⁴⁰⁶

In Lynch's comparison, Anderson centers on Christ's kenosis and self-emptying love as the paradigm for Christian life. Thomas, while arguably also Christocentric,

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 181-83.

⁴⁰¹ Ibid., 188-90.

⁴⁰² Ibid., 159-61, 180-81.

⁴⁰³ See Ibid., 136, 180.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 115-6.

⁴⁰⁵ Ibid., 136, citing Paul J. Wadell, *Friendship and the Moral Life* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 122.

⁴⁰⁶ Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership*, 136.

emphasizes the Triune God's life of perfect love and friendship as a relationality in which humans are invited to participate. Moreover, Anderson's emphasis on kenosis suggests a model of love primarily driven by self-sacrifice and a desire to emulate Christ's self-giving. Thomas, while valuing selflessness, grounds love in a "natural inclination" toward "beatitude"—the fulfilment or perfection of the rational being.⁴⁰⁷ Consequently, while both view union with God as the ultimate goal, their understandings of this union differ. For Anderson, this is a particularly ecclesial, arguably exclusive, "becoming one" in Christ through participation in his kenotic life. For Thomas, this participation refers to sharing in God's perfect happiness, grounded in the Trinity's friendship-love, ultimately rooted in the doctrine of God rather than Christology.

5.3.3 Friendship as a Framework for Collective Leadership: Potential and Pitfalls

Lynch's model of friendship offers a potentially valuable framework for understanding and strengthening shared leadership, moving beyond pragmatic considerations to a deeper understanding of mutual love and service. This framework could be particularly beneficial for a context like GMBC, where the first generation's shared leadership, while effective in some ways, may have exhibited a managerial quality. By emphasizing the importance of deep emotional connection and mutual trust, Lynch's model could foster a more genuine sense of interdependence and collective ownership. While GMBC's leaders already recognize the importance of collectivity and consensus, their current approach, shaped by an institutionally mandated agreement, might benefit from the "organic" agreement fostered by deep friendships suggested by Lynch. The current emphasis on presenting a unified image to the congregation could inadvertently mask underlying relational tensions. Furthermore, without intentional efforts to cultivate and repair friendships, and with a tendency to suppress difficult emotions, these tensions might remain unresolved, potentially contributing to conflicts and challenges. Similarly, while the second generation at

⁴⁰⁷ This terminology seems to be favoured by some scholars of Thomas Aquinas. See David M. Gallagher, "Desire for Beatitude and Love of Friendship in Thomas Aquinas," *Mediaeval Studies* 58 (1996): 1. While Lynch does not use this exact phrasing, her understanding aligns with this interpretation.

GMBC demonstrates greater comfort with decentralized collaboration, nurturing deeper friendships within the leadership team could enhance their shared ministry and create a more joyful and resilient leadership culture. The current reliance on lengthy meetings, compounded by life stressors and fatigue, suggests an opportunity to explore how Lynch's model of friendship might create space for greater relational depth and mutual support.

This insight reveals another blind spot of managerialism within the ecclesial context: the prioritization of "professionalism" leads to a separation of "church business" from personal life and emotions. This ostensibly efficient approach, however, results in diminished motivation and reduced effectiveness. Conversely, Lynch's model does not disregard operational efficiency. Her concept of "transient roles" mitigates the potential pitfalls of "sheep leading sheep." While Jesus remains the ultimate shepherd of the church, he delegates authority to his disciples, encouraging them to learn and lead courageously. In practice, through community-recognized delegation, different leaders can assume core decision-making roles in various domains or timeframes, thus avoiding the pitfalls of groupthink and the herd mentality in collective leadership.

The concept of leadership as friendship might also offer a compelling counter-narrative to the "exemplary leadership" paradigm, reinforced by the "soldier of Christ" imagery dominant within GMBC's leadership. It particularly affirms and supports the "group learners" approach adopted by the second generational leaders. This perspective does not negate the selfless, virtuous qualities and passionate commitment to God's mission exhibited by the founders, but rather cautions against their reification into rigid templates or laws. Crucially, it liberates second-generation leaders from the burden of comparison and potential feelings of inadequacy. As the concept of friendship underscores, within a faith community, competence is not the sole metric of value; sincerity also holds transformative power.

Finally, and most challenging, is the interplay between this friendship-based leadership model and paternalistic leadership, particularly within the complexities and nuances of the prevailing culture. While Lynch's advocacy for rotating systems

aligns remarkably with GMBC's espoused ideal of a collective model, his depiction of friendship closely resembles the current state of GMBC's second-generation leadership. However, Lynch's model struggles to explain the persistent coalescence of leadership around a hidden paternal figure possessing age, character, and competence. Moreover, the absence of such a figure leads to instability, diffused responsibility, and inefficiency. Further understanding of this challenge requires examination through a Confucian lens. While Chow uses this more holistic understanding of relationships to argue against reducing Confucianism to solely "patriarchal and authoritarian structures," the data in this study reveals a concurrent reality. This deeply ingrained paternalistic relational dynamic requires acknowledgment within theological frameworks. Therefore, one cannot simply endorse one set of values over another but must engage with the dynamic interplay of all these influences. Therefore, while Lynch's friendship image, based on individualistic cultures, can be insightful for GMBC, particularly its second-generation leaders, a more holistic theological framework for Chinese church leadership requires a more comprehensive approach. Specifically, it necessitates a theological anthropology that adequately addresses the individual and collective dimensions of relationality and personhood.

Implications for further theological construction

Finally, Lynch's research proves invaluable for studies like this, not necessarily because it establishes a "generalizable" or "universal" normative model of ecclesial leadership, but because its key theological insights offer valuable "transferability" for further discussion.

Firstly, in terms of theological method, Lynch demonstrates an awareness of the potent yet potentially problematic nature of theological imagery in practice, emboldening her to dissect prevalent images in Christian discourse and propose alternatives. As she notes in a footnote:

The beauty of metaphor is the space for a plurality of images. McFague insists that such plurality is essential because all metaphors are "inappropriate, partial and inadequate". As Volf remarks, a 'plurality of models

[is] . . . not only legitimate, but indeed desirable'.⁴⁰⁸

However, while embracing this plurality, she does not fully integrate or engage her proposed image of "friendship" with the existing image of the servant leader. This leaves her model potentially vulnerable to the same risks she identifies regarding the limitations of singular images, especially given the culturally specific nuances and inherent limitations of her metaphor of friendship. Therefore, creating a space for multiple images to genuinely represent this plurality remains a key challenge. This includes allowing diverse and even conflicting images, even including those in military language like in GMBC, to express their particular insights without dominating the discourse. This task is the focus of my next chapter.

Extending Lynch's insights, Church leadership must navigate the intersection of ecclesiology and theological anthropology—or, more precisely, the theological understanding of the "human person." This involves considering both the theological ideals of the church (its nature, purpose, and relationship to God) and the complexities of human behavior and experience in everyday life within a particular social and cultural context. The tension between the "Home" and "Soldier" images at GMBC illustrates this challenge. The "Home" metaphor emphasizes nurturing, belonging, and shared life, reflecting a particular ecclesiology centered on community. The "Soldier" metaphor, however, highlights discipline, warfare, and spiritual struggle, drawing on a theological anthropology that emphasizes spiritual conflict and the need for individual strength. Lynch's work, while not directly addressing this specific tension, offers a framework for navigating such competing images by grounding leadership in the relational dynamics of friendship. However, her attempt to connect Thomistic friendship to Anderson's incarnational ecclesiology reveals a discontinuity, suggesting the need for further theological reflection on how these frameworks can be integrated more effectively.

Finally, a key weakness in Lynch's theological construction and practical application is an insufficient recognition of the darker aspects of human nature. While she

⁴⁰⁸ Lynch, *Ecclesial Leadership*, 72n127. The works Lynch refers to are: Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987) and Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

acknowledges the risk of toxic relationships, framing leadership solely through "friendship" risks romanticizing a complex reality, especially in high-pressure contexts like GMBC that expose human frailty. This oversight is particularly problematic for Barthian theology, where the fallen human condition is not merely a practical consideration, but the very foundation for understanding human nature, community, and leadership. Only from this starting point can genuine identification with Christ, rather than superficial imitation, occur, allowing for a true relinquishing of heroism and an embrace of vulnerability.

While Lynch's framework offers a valuable counterpoint, the core challenge remains the "Soldier " image itself. Ultimately, this multifaceted analysis of the "Soldier of Christ" metaphor has further developed the thesis's central argument, demonstrating how a dominant leadership image can create significant strain and hinder the very collective model it is meant to support. Having now established the limitations of the church's core ecclesiological image ("Home") in the previous chapter, and its primary leadership image ("Soldiers") in this one, a foundational question emerges. Where do these powerful yet problematic images get their authority? The answer points to a more fundamental inquiry. The analysis must therefore turn to the theological bedrock of the community's identity—its biblical faith—to understand the source of these metaphors before a constructive theological alternative can be proposed.

Chapter 6. Navigating Biblical Faith: Scripture, Interpretation, and Leadership

This chapter examines the dynamic interplay between biblical authority and lived theology among GMBC elders, focusing on the tensions that arise from their engagement with scripture, particularly within the context of generational shifts in leadership. At the same time, these tensions offer a crucial entry point for understanding the lived faith of GMBC's lay leaders and for exploring potential pathways toward renewal. One key aspect of this dynamic is the prominent role of metaphorical interpretation in Chinese Christianity. This chapter will explore how GMBC elders employ metaphorical language to connect with scripture and navigate complex theological concepts. It will also consider the possibility that, in contrast to some Western evangelical traditions, the relative absence of explicit debates about the legitimacy of figurative language within Chinese Christianity has contributed to the flourishing of metaphorical interpretation. My exploration is framed as a 'faith seeking collaboration,' drawing upon diverse theoretical perspectives, including the work of Brian Malley on Biblicism, the insights of Watchman Nee and Wang Mingdao on Chinese Christianity, cognitive linguistic theories of metaphor, and Christian Smith's concept of scriptural "multivocality" and advocacy for a Christocentric hermeneutic.

6.1 The Paradox of Biblical Authority: Bridging Belief and Practice

The symbolic authority of sacred scriptures is widespread among religious communities, exhibiting both commonalities and unique group-specific characteristics, which makes comparative research possible. Sociological perspectives, notably Durkheim's work, offer further insight into the Bible as a sacred text, explaining how religious symbols derive power not from inherent qualities but from representing the social group, acquiring sacredness through collective affirmation and ritual intensity.⁴⁰⁹ While this framework offers valuable insights into

⁴⁰⁹ Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (Dinslaken: Anboco, 2016 [1912]),

the dynamic interaction with the bible in people's lived experience, it tends to examine religious behaviors from an external perspective. This makes it difficult to fully explore the relationship between these activities and the group's beliefs—in other words, their theological depth. Consequently, while this approach provides valuable observations, it may not directly contribute to the renewal of faith within the community. The *emic* understanding symbolic authority from within a specific faith community is essential for comprehending its transformative potential.

That said, biblical interpretation varies considerably across Christian denominations, even within global evangelical communities. David Bebbington identifies "biblicism" as a defining characteristic of evangelicalism, alongside "conversionism", "activism", and "crucicentrism".⁴¹⁰ Alexander Chow argues that for Chinese evangelicals, despite variations in some other aspects compared to the western traditions, the Bible's authority remains fundamental.⁴¹¹ This suggests that Chinese Christian communities may exhibit distinct forms of biblicism. This section compares Brian Malley's ethnographic research with data from GMBC elders. It argues that a distinct metaphorical approach shapes symbolic authority and scriptural interpretation, especially in lay people's daily biblical engagement within Chinese evangelical communities. Understanding this approach is crucial for grasping the community's practical renewal.

6.1.1 Malley's Ethnography and Framework on Biblicism

Brian Malley's ethnographic study of biblicism within a conservative North American evangelical church offers valuable insights for bridging this gap. His work illuminates how biblical authority is practiced within an evangelical context, or, as his book title suggests, *How the Bible Works*.⁴¹² Although Malley's fieldwork, particularly his

⁴¹⁰ David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2.

⁴¹¹ Alexander Chow, "Urbanisation, Diaspora, and the Tenacity of Chinese Evangelicalism," in *Ecumenism and Independency in World Christianity: Historical Studies in Honour of Brian Stanley*, ed. Alexander Chow and Emma Wild-Wood (Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston: Brill, 2020), 329–46.

⁴¹² Brian J. Malley, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2004).

qualitative interviews, focuses on a specific church community, much like this study, his insights offer valuable comparative perspectives. This does not mean directly applying Malley's framework to the GMBC data, but rather identifying similarities and differences in the observed patterns. This "faith-seeking collaboration" can illuminate biblical faith within Chinese churches.

In Malley's research, he distinguishes between the "principle of biblical authority" (the abstract belief that the Bible is authoritative) and the "practice of biblical authority" (how it is actually used in everyday life).⁴¹³ While evangelicals may affirm the principle of total biblical authority as a defining characteristic of their identity,⁴¹⁴ in practice they often selectively interpret and apply its teachings.⁴¹⁵ Malley observes the flexible and pragmatic nature of evangelical interpretation, demonstrating how the principle of total biblical authority is often negotiated in practice. This negotiation is evident in the handling of apparent contradictions or difficult passages, often prioritizing personal relevance and existing beliefs over strict literalism.⁴¹⁶ Furthermore, Malley examines how evangelicals understand, interpret, and use the Bible, arguing that their engagement is less about recovering the text's original meaning and more about establishing a connection between it and their pre-existing beliefs. This connection, which Malley terms "transitivity," is key to understanding evangelical biblicism.⁴¹⁷ Evangelicals, Malley notes, prioritize connecting the Bible to their existing beliefs, often at the expense of rigorous historical interpretation.⁴¹⁸ This connection, however tenuous, allows them to claim their beliefs are "biblical," imbuing them with the authority of scripture. The goal, then, is not accurate exegesis but the creation of transitivity. This process is facilitated by the assumption, often implicit, that the Bible contains all truth, making it a repository to which any valued belief can potentially be linked.⁴¹⁹ Malley argues that this transitivity is central to evangelical belief transmission, facilitated by flexible interpretation driven by the

⁴¹³ Malley, 126-7. Malley especially discusses the concept of "inerrancy" as a key component of the principle of biblical authority.

⁴¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 94-105.

⁴¹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 79.

pursuit of personal relevance.⁴²⁰ This approach to the text, coupled with the assumption of the Bible's inherent authority, allows the Bible to function as a dynamic source of meaning and guidance within the lives of American evangelicals.

While acknowledging Durkheim's insight regarding the social nature of sacred objects and the "symbolism" of the Bible, Malley developed Durkheim's model, where the Bible symbolizes a pre-existing society, into an interactive process. In this interactive process, the Bible's authority arises from its role in creating and maintaining the social practices of evangelical communities.⁴²¹ Within this interaction, the Bible's authority within the community, and the beliefs attached to this symbol, can mutually reinforce each other. However, this dynamic can also experience crises. Sometimes, challenges arise externally, for instance, when biblical texts appear to clash with contemporary scientific understanding or societal norms.⁴²² In these instances, Malley observes that the inherent flexibility of transitivity functions as a buffer, mitigating potential conflicts. This allows for a dynamic interplay between faith and the external world through the reinterpretation of seemingly contradictory passages, often prioritizing personal relevance and prevailing cultural values over rigid, literal interpretations.⁴²³ However, this interpretive flexibility, while facilitating personal connection and relevance, simultaneously creates space for differing interpretations of specific doctrines or practices, leading to disagreements and debates.⁴²⁴ Malley argues that these internal debates are often navigated through appeals to the broader and more inclusive interpretation, even when specific interpretations diverge.⁴²⁵

Malley's model of biblical authority, with its distinction between principle and practice, finds strong resonance in the GMBC case study, although with added nuances. The "Bible as symbol of authority" at GMBC mirrors Malley's principle of authority, functioning as a broad, abstract claim about scripture's ultimate importance and

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*, 94. Malley observes that evangelical hermeneutics emphasizes relevance over strict adherence to historical meaning, highlighting its flexible and adaptable nature.

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, 137-140.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 94.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴²⁴ *Ibid.*, 94-105.

⁴²⁵ *Ibid.*, 140.

serving to legitimize decisions and practices. Similarly, the "Bible as source of images" parallels Malley's practice of authority, highlighting the dynamic and often unconscious ways individuals interpret and apply scripture in specific situations to find relevance and meaning. Specifically, the case of GMBC provides compelling examples of Malley's concept of "transitivity." Leaders frequently connect their beliefs and practices to the Bible, even if the connection is tenuous. Vasilios*'s justification of the "Bible Church" model and Nasos*'s defense of collective leadership exemplify this process of attributing beliefs and practices to biblical authority. The respect and trust afforded a leader like Vasilios* meant that followers, and even other leaders, associated his style and opinions with the Bible itself—as illustrated by Neofytos*'s description of Vasilios* as a "biblical" person.

Moreover, the elders' preference for flexible interpretation over strict hermeneutics is particularly evident in their practice of using the Bible to reach consensus within the leadership team, resonating strongly with Malley's observations. For example, Marios*'s rejection of "fundamentalism" and purely "literal" interpretations highlights their embrace of interpretive flexibility as a means of achieving consensus and accommodating individual perspectives. Vasilios*'s "minimized" principle—allowing practices not explicitly prohibited by scripture—aligns with Malley's observation that evangelicals often seek broad, overarching principles to facilitate agreement. This is further illustrated by Elias*'s approach, which emphasizes using scripture to find agreement while deliberately avoiding contentious topics within conservative evangelicalism, such as female leadership, demonstrating a similar buffering strategy.

At the individual level of faith, Malley's argument that evangelical Bible reading is driven by a search for relevance is clearly demonstrated in the GMBC case. Second-generation leaders, such as Gavriil*, were drawn to the first generation precisely because they perceived their insight in connecting scripture to personal life and aspired to a similar lived experience of the Bible. The prevalence of metaphorical expressions, within GMBC, rather than propositional theological statements, stems from this intuitive and dynamic pursuit of relevance.

6.1.2 The Limits of Transitivity: Imagery and Diversity

However, engaging with Malley's work also reveals two points warranting further investigation. First is the issue of imagery, or the metaphorical approach to biblical texts. Malley notes that some within American Biblicism consider this "figurative approach" as "distorting, even corrupting" the absolute authority of scripture.⁴²⁶ However, he also observes that this dispreference is often "selective" in evangelical practice, driven by the pursuit of relevance.⁴²⁷ In contrast to this contentious and qualified acceptance of figurative interpretation, GMBC leaders employ such imagery boldly, seemingly unconstrained by concerns about scriptural authority. Given the prevalence of imagery-based approaches within Chinese Christianity, as established in Chapter One, and its clear manifestation in GMBC leadership, an opportunity emerges to explore its potential for articulating and renewing the lived theology of this group and the broader Chinese church.

A related, yet more challenging, second issue arises from the significant role of personal experience, relational dynamics, and emotional resonance in shaping the understanding and application of biblical images. This added layer of complexity significantly complicates the "transitivity" of belief, transforming it from a fixed set of transmitted beliefs into a dynamic process amplified by individual understanding and interpretation. This results in diverse interpretations of scripture among leaders, particularly regarding the church's mission and leadership structure, both between and within generations. This goes beyond the tension between literalism and relevance revealed in Malley's study, exposing a gap between the ideal of biblical authority and actual practice. Simply using the Bible as a minimized "bottom line" or avoiding interpretive controversies is insufficient to buffer and manage this diversity and divergence, much less heal existing pains. A re-evaluation of approaches to the Bible is thus imperative. The following sections will explore these two points respectively.

6.2 Living Metaphors: Biblical Interpretation in Chinese Christianity

6.2.1 Metaphorical Interpretation and Chinese theologians

⁴²⁶ Malley, 100, referring to Crapanzano, Vincent. 2000. *Serving the Word: Literalism in America from the Pulpit to the Bench*. New York: The New Press.

⁴²⁷ Malley, 101.

As noted in section 1.3.3, metaphorical interpretation has distinct characteristics within Chinese Christianity, particularly evident in the work of Watchman Nee and Wang Mingdao. However, its precise function requires further investigation. Wai-Luen Kwok's research on the interpretive practices of these prominent Chinese church leaders, specifically their engagement with scripture, provides valuable insights.⁴²⁸ Coupled with Malley's findings and observations from GMBC, a clearer understanding of this approach emerges.

Kwok's research indicates that both of these prominent Chinese church leaders, while renowned for their sharp rejection of Western missionaries and their denominational structures, staunchly upheld biblical authority within their respective theological systems. They emphasized complete trust in the Bible as the "living Word" of God which is transcendent to all religious or denominational traditions, and adhered to literal interpretations—paradoxically, of the missionary-translated Chinese Union Version. This intriguing paradox not only reflects their belief in the Bible as transcendent revelation, unimpeded by human translation, but also potentially suggests a pragmatic tendency and a culturally conditioned acceptance of seeming contradictions. While Kwok attempts to frame Wang and Nee's view of biblical authority as "a different understanding of Sola Scriptura,"⁴²⁹ he acknowledges that neither leader sought to connect their approach to the Western Reformation tradition. Kwok further observes an emphasis on spiritual practice in how Nee and Wang approached Bible reading—prioritising reading, memorization, and prayer over intellectual analysis. Kwok observes an emphasis on spiritual practice in how Nee and Wang approached Bible reading—prioritizing reading, memorization, and prayer over intellectual analysis. Kwok notes that this approach parallels the much older, pre-Reformation spiritual tradition of *Lectio Divina*. He then argues that in the practices of Nee, Wang, and the missionaries, this mediaeval devotional stream was "unintentionally integrated" with Protestant Reformation principles and Chinese culture to form an organic whole through the Union

⁴²⁸ Wai Luen Kwok, "Sola Scriptura's and the Chinese Union Version Bible's Impact upon Conservative Christian Leaders: The Case of Watchman Nee and Wang Mingdao," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 30, no. 1 (January 2020): 93–103.

⁴²⁹ *Ibid.*, 93.

Version,"⁴³⁰ emphasizing the Union Version's significance within Chinese Christianity.

Although not expressed in sociological terms, Kwok's observations corroborate certain characteristics of Western Biblicism identified by Malley. For example, Wang and Nee's biblical interpretation appealed directly to the CUV translation, neglecting original languages and historical-literary context, while particularly highlighting the "lack of hermeneutics" and "drive for relevance" in applying scripture to life. Notably, the "unintentional" nature of this process, as highlighted by Kwok in the thought of Wang and Nee, further resonates with Malley's "transitivity" mechanism, where biblical texts are directly linked to pre-existing beliefs. This is corroborated by Lui's study of Wang Mingdao's biblical interpretation, noting that "whenever [Wang] found no contradiction between his faith and his tradition, he applied Confucian ideas to his teachings without hesitation."⁴³¹ This interpretive approach would likely be unacceptable to Western biblical literalists. However, Wang's comfort with it stems from his selective engagement with (and rejection of) Western biblical traditions. While respecting the symbolic authority of scripture, he constructs a distinct "transitivity," bridging the interpretive gap between text and practice not with inherited Western evangelical beliefs, but with his own culturally situated understanding.

This Chinese version of Biblicistic "transitivity" creates space for the frequent use of imagery in biblical interpretation by Nee, Wang, and even other contemporary Chinese Christian figures from diverse theological backgrounds. Although not explicitly addressed by Kwok, such examples are prevalent in the writings and sermons of Nee and Wang. The following examples illustrate how Wang, despite a more conservative reputation, employs imagery more boldly than is typical in Western traditions, although not as extensively or elaborately as Nee.⁴³²

One example is Wang's elaboration on the parable of the fig tree from Luke 13:1-9.

⁴³⁰ Ibid., 103.

⁴³¹ Otto Lui, *Development of Chinese Church Leaders: A Study of Relational Leadership in Contemporary Chinese Churches* (Carlisle: Langham, 2013), 145.

⁴³² Jacob Chengwei Feng, "Theological Method of Chinese Theology in the Republican Era (1911–1949): A Case Study of Wang Mingdao and Watchman Nee," *Journal of Chinese Theology* 9 (2023): 38–65.

In his sermon "This Year, Let It Be",⁴³³ Wang expands on this parable to illustrate God's patience with humanity and the urgent need for repentance and righteous living. Therefore, the fig tree, valued solely for its fruit, becomes a powerful image of the individual's responsibility to bear spiritual fruit. Wang categorizes trees, using common northern Chinese species as examples, into three groups: those "bearing good fruit," those "bearing no fruit," and those "bearing bad fruit," drawing an analogy to different moral states: The "good fruit" represents righteous actions and words, while the "bad fruit" signifies harmful deeds and speech. Those who bear no fruit, while not actively malicious, are still seen as failing to fulfil their moral responsibility. This metaphorical framework originated in the biblical text allows Wang to incorporate morality - largely Confucian values - in a relatable and impactful manner. This aligns with Kwok's observation that Wang's teaching emphasizes practical application of scripture.

The imagery of ethical purity, particularly through the color white, is another prominent theme in Wang's sermons. In "The Color of Heaven",⁴³⁴ Wang draws on various passages from Revelation to highlight the symbolic significance of white. He connects the white garments of the elders, the white robes of the redeemed multitude, and the white horse of the conquering Christ to the concept of spiritual purity. Wang thus leverages the common cultural associations of white with cleanliness and spotlessness to convey the idea of a life free from sin. He states, "White is such a pure, lovely, noble, beautiful color, and it cannot tolerate any filth. This is the colour of heaven, the colour that God loves."⁴³⁵ This evocative language, rooted in the imagery of Revelation, emphasizes the importance of striving for an ethically flawless life.

Wang respects biblical authority but operates outside the confines of Western biblical literalism, eschewing inherited evangelical beliefs. Instead, he forges vivid and

⁴³³ Wang Mingdao (王明道), "今年且留著" ["This Year, Let It Be"], in 靈食 [Spiritual Food], ed. 王正中 (Wang Zhengzhong), *Collected Works of Wang Mingdao Third Volume* (Douliu: Conservative Baptist Press, 1977), 90-99.

⁴³⁴ Wang Mingdao (王明道), "天上的顏色" ["The Color of Heaven"], in 靈食 [Spiritual Food], ed. 王正中 (Wang Zhengzhong), *Collected Works of Wang Mingdao Third Volume* (Douliu: Conservative Baptist Press, 1977), 20-25.

⁴³⁵ Ibid.

compelling connections between his own cultural values and practices and the biblical text. Biblical narratives, particularly their rich imagery, serve as a wellspring of inspiration, facilitating the creation of “transitive” spaces. Similarly original metaphorical understandings are evident among GMBC leaders. For example, regarding the “body of Christ” metaphor, Elias* uses it to emphasize the universality of faith and downplay denominational authority, while Vasilios* uses it to stress the vital, long-term connection between leaders and congregants, thus rejecting the practice of appointing external “parachute” senior pastors.

However, the source of this metaphorical approach in GMBC leadership, which parallels that of Nee and Wang, remains unclear, particularly as a direct theological influence seems unlikely. While both Nee and Wang are regarded as heroes of the faith within GMBC and many other Chinese churches, their writings are seldom directly read by GMBC leaders. This absence is corroborated by the interviews, which contain no mention of them, and their infrequent citation in sermons. One possibility is an indirect influence passed down through mentoring relationships, similar to Elias*'s influence on Gavriil*, a common phenomenon in Chinese churches. Alternatively, a shared cultural context may facilitate this metaphorical approach. The following section examines the role of shared cultural context in facilitating this approach.

6.2.2 "Metaphors We Live By": Cognitive Foundations and Leadership Narratives

An intuitive explanation for the prevalent use of imagery in Chinese evangelical churches is its connection to characteristics of Chinese culture, as metaphors and images are pervasive throughout Chinese society. As Stephanie de Oliveira and Richard E. Nisbett suggest, cultural norms of individualism and collectivism shape cognitive patterns.⁴³⁶ They suggest that Western thought, emphasizing reason and simplification to achieve decisive answers, contrasts with Eastern thought, which accepts complexity and change, aligning more readily with the nuanced and flexible

⁴³⁶ Richard E. Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought: How Asians and Westerners Think Differently...and Why* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2003). See also, Stephanie de Oliveira and Richard E. Nisbett, “Culture Changes How We Think About Thinking,” *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 12, no. 5 (September 2017): 782–90.

nature of imagery. Some Chinese scholars who support this hypothesis of cultural difference suggest that Chinese cultural traditions exhibit a distinct tendency towards image thinking compared to Western traditions.⁴³⁷ This impression is further investigated by socio-psychological studies that seek to quantify this characteristic and explore its practical applications.⁴³⁸ This focus on imagery thinking is also increasingly prominent in the study of Chinese folk religions. In a recent study, Liang et al., employing a cultural psychology perspective, analyse the image of Chinese Kitchen God(灶神), revealing its embodiment of complex cultural beliefs and psychological archetypes.⁴³⁹ They posit that "imagery thinking" within Chinese culture plays a key role, providing concrete representations for abstract concepts. Through personification and narrative, the image evokes strong emotional resonance and conveys moral guidance, facilitating the Kitchen God's function as a conduit between everyday life and the spiritual realm. While these varied perspectives offer valuable insights and help to nuance the focus of inquiry, they also present certain challenges. For instance, Nisbett et al.'s claims regarding East-West cognitive differences have been sharply criticized for imposing dichotomies that obscure substantial cultural commonalities and risk falling into the trap of cultural essentialism.⁴⁴⁰ Other studies in cultural psychology and religious studies, while sometimes supported by empirical data, struggle to produce robust practical

⁴³⁷ It is important to note that this concept of "imagery thinking," while prevalent in the writings of Chinese scholars, is not explicitly featured in Nisbett et al.'s framework of cultural differences. For instance, Wang attempts to confirm and trace the prevalence of imagery thinking in Chinese culture by citing intrinsic features like the pictorial nature of Chinese characters. See Wang Shuren, "The Roots of Chinese Philosophy and Culture—An Introduction to 'Xiang' and 'Xiang Thinking'," *Frontiers of Philosophy in China* 4, no. 1 (2009): 1–12.

⁴³⁸ For instance, a psychological marketing study by Liang et al. using quantitative methods found that mainland Chinese participants demonstrated greater imagery-generation abilities than both Singaporean Chinese and Americans when presented with abstract advertisements, regardless of language. The authors argue this supports the influence of "concrete thinking" on imagery generation. Despite its solid empirical findings, the study's limited scope and the gap between "imagery-generation ability" and the broader concept of "imagery thinking" remain. Beichen Liang, Joseph Cherian, and Yili Liu, "Concrete Thinking or Ideographic Language: Which Is the Reason for Chinese People's Higher Imagery-Generation Abilities?" *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 34 (2010): 52–60.

⁴³⁹ Jingyu Liang, Yancui Zhang, Ruitong Guo, and Heyong Shen, "A Jungian Analysis of the Chinese Kitchen God Image," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 27, no. 6 (2021): 1–29.

⁴⁴⁰ Ho Mun Chan and Hektor K. T. Yan, "Is There a Geography of Thought for East-West Differences? Why or Why Not?" *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 39, no. 4 (2007): 383.

implications given the inherent ambiguities and fluidity of culture.

Acknowledging the limitations of existing approaches, this study proposes an alternative explanation, without entirely dismissing cultural influences: the distinctive characteristic of Chinese Christianity stems primarily from its theological framework. While inheriting evangelicalism broadly, Chinese Christians—including Nee, Wang, and the leaders of GMBC—have not been embroiled in the debates surrounding figurative language that have characterized some evangelical strands. This relative absence of "fear of metaphors" within their theological context may have provided these leaders greater latitude in interpreting and practicing scripture. The extent to which cultural background contributes to this phenomenon remains an open question.

Nevertheless, this freedom to employ metaphorical interpretation aligns with the insights of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in their seminal work, *Metaphors We Live By*. Their cognitive linguistic research demonstrates how metaphorical thinking shapes our understanding of abstract concepts, including theological ones, and consequently influences our actions.⁴⁴¹ As they argue, it is widely observed in human experience that "[a]bstract thought is largely, though not entirely, metaphorical. Metaphorical thought is unavoidable, ubiquitous, and mostly unconscious."⁴⁴² Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphors shape how we perceive, think, and act. They are not merely linguistic flourishes but fundamental to our understanding of abstract concepts, while the metaphors in human thoughts are "grounded in everyday experience", linking "our sensory-motor experience to the domain of our subjective judgements".⁴⁴³

Furthermore, Lakoff and Johnson's exploration of how metaphorical thinking shapes cognition and understanding, particularly across personal and interpersonal dimensions,⁴⁴⁴ is highly relevant to GMBC's leadership narratives. First, the

⁴⁴¹ Lakoff and Johnson work's methodological implications, addressed in Chapter 2 as a valuable device within ethnographic methods, will be further explored in this section, connecting their insights to practical experience.

⁴⁴² George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 287.

⁴⁴³ *Ibid.*, 269.

⁴⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 246-8.

"personal metaphors" for self-understanding. Lakoff and Johnson argue that "we seek out personal metaphors to highlight and make coherent our own pasts, our present activities, and our dreams, hopes, and goals as well."⁴⁴⁵ Second, Lakoff and Johnson argue that "interpersonal metaphors" are crucial for communication. Lakoff and Johnson highlight that mutual and genuine understanding, even between speakers of the same language, arises from a complex, dynamic negotiation, not mere information transfer. Within this interaction, metaphorical imagination is essential for establishing rapport and conveying experiences that are not shared.⁴⁴⁶ However, the authors caution that understanding communication is often hampered by the "conduit metaphor,"⁴⁴⁷ which assumes knowledge and meaning can be unidirectionally transmitted:

When it really counts, meaning is almost never communicated according to the CONDUIT metaphor, that is, where one person transmits a fixed, clear proposition to another by means of expressions in a common language, where both parties have all the relevant common knowledge, assumptions, values, etc.⁴⁴⁸

This understanding of metaphors is crucial for analysing GMBC's use of imagery, recognizing that these images shape not only their understanding of the Bible but also their leadership practices and communal identity. Through these varied analyses, the function of the Bible within GMBC and its leadership becomes clearer. It is not a fixed, static, and rigid foundation supporting a self-contained system of beliefs and values. Rather, beneath the professed reverence for its authority lies a largely unnoticed, ambiguous space of interpretation, where the texts and narratives intertwine with the leaders' cultural backgrounds, personal beliefs, lived experiences, and interpersonal influences, generating fluid yet vibrant insights and rich theological imagery that, in turn, shape GMBC's daily practices.

An examination of GMBC's leadership imagery reveals the widespread use of "personal images," encompassing both identification (with "teachers," "givers," etc.)

⁴⁴⁵ Ibid., 247.

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid., 246.

⁴⁴⁷ This refers to a view of communication that presumes "the meaning is right there in the words", and thus treats meaning as pre-packaged and transmitted through a neutral channel. See Ibid., 224, 229, 246-7.

⁴⁴⁸ Ibid., 246.

and rejection (King Saul) in reflecting on personal identity. The tension, fluidity, and evident generational differences between these images reflect the ongoing negotiation of identity construction. Conversely, "collective metaphors" with interpersonal implications appear to emphasize hierarchical structures more than "horizontal" mutuality. For example, both "soldiers" and "sheep" implicitly convey a unidirectional flow of knowledge and guidance from an authority figure—whether God as "commander" or "shepherd"—presumed to represent a shared understanding. Similarly, the "Paul-Timothy" image emphasizes a mentor-mentee dynamic, contrasting sharply with the image of "friendship" proposed by Lynch in the previous chapter. In contrast, metaphors like "group learners" (Stavros*) and "ship adrift" (Nasos*) exhibit a slightly stronger mutual dimension, yet they also appear more detached from the biblical text. This suggests a tension between these communal metaphorical understandings in their real-life experience and the stable, objective "Biblical faith" the leaders desired. This tension necessitates a renewed understanding of "Biblical"—one that embraces the dynamic interplay of text, interpretation, and lived experience.

In summary, Lakoff and Johnson argue that metaphorical thinking is fundamental to all human cognition. This challenges the notion that Chinese Christianity's reliance on imagery is merely a cultural peculiarity. Rather than advocating another form of universalism, this approach can accommodate and even illuminate the differences between various groups by providing a demonstrable cognitive commonality that explains the function of metaphors across superficial cultural variations.

Furthermore, their argument that individuals employ metaphors spontaneously, intuitively, and unintentionally resonates with Nee and Wang's "unintentional integration"⁴⁴⁹ when using imagery to approach biblical texts—and this is precisely where the creativity lies. As they suggest, the potential inconsistency of metaphors used in conceptual reasoning reflects the dynamic nature of human thought.⁴⁵⁰

However, such inconsistency and ambiguity, as diverse metaphors interact, fosters novel conceptualizations: new metaphors, representing new ways of organising and understanding experience, emerge from the new combination of metaphorical

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 96, 103.

⁴⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 287.

constructs.⁴⁵¹

Lakoff and Johnson's metaphorical approach can aid GMBC's leadership renewal by facilitating reflection on their theological imagery, which embodies the leaders' authentic lived faith and shapes their practice. New images are welcome, specifically metaphors that highlight shared experience, recognize the complexities of human relationships, avoid oversimplification and stereotypes, remain open to negotiation and reinterpretation, and ultimately foster mutual understanding and connection. This can eventually provide a renewed understanding of "Biblical" itself. However, this approach must also address the potential tension between interpretive diversity and the need for leadership consensus.

6.3 Embracing Interpretive Diversity: A Christocentric Approach

6.3.1 The Challenge of Multivocality: Rethinking Biblical Authority

Malley's research highlighted the interpretive diversity afforded by "transitivity," a dynamic mirrored in GMBC where leaders, despite their shared commitment to scriptural authority, exhibit significant interpretive differences, particularly regarding mission and leadership structure. This diversity, as Christian Smith observes in *The Bible Made Impossible*, directly challenges Biblicism's foundational assumption of scriptural clarity.⁴⁵² Smith's work illuminates how this dynamic can render the Bible, in a sense, "impossible," even within a community like GMBC. While appealing to overarching principles might mitigate interpretive breakdowns, the persistent pluralism of interpretations, as Smith analyzes within broader evangelicalism, underscores the inherent tension between the ideal of a clear, unified biblical message and the reality of diverse interpretations.⁴⁵³

Smith begins *The Bible Made Impossible* by highlighting the extensive interpretive disagreements extending beyond traditional theological debates. He lists a litany of contested issues, ranging from church polity and the role of good works in salvation

⁴⁵¹ Ibid., 265.

⁴⁵² Christian Smith, *The Bible Made Impossible: Why Biblicism Is Not a Truly Evangelical Reading of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011).

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 26-54.

to the ethics of wealth and capital punishment.⁴⁵⁴ This diversity of interpretations, derived from the same scriptural text, immediately problematizes the notion of a singular, easily discernible biblical truth. He further illustrates this point with specific examples, such as the conflicting interpretations of scripture used to justify both slavery and abolition,⁴⁵⁵ demonstrating how Biblicism struggles to provide clear guidance on even fundamental moral issues.

Faced with this challenge, proponents of Biblicism often resort to various defensive strategies. Smith outlines and critiques several of these, including blaming deficient readers, appealing to lost original autographs, and invoking the noetic effects of sin.⁴⁵⁶ He argues that these defenses ultimately fail to address the core issue: Blaming "flawed readers"⁴⁵⁷

Smith's central argument hinges on the concept of scriptural "multivocality"⁴⁵⁸. He argues that the Bible, far from presenting a univocal message, is inherently polysemic, capable of conveying multiple meanings to different readers.⁴⁵⁹ This multivocality arises from the diverse genres, historical contexts, and literary styles present within scripture. Readers, in turn, approach the Bible with pre-existing interpretive frameworks, or "paradigms," which shape their understanding and prioritize certain texts while downplaying or reinterpreting others.⁴⁶⁰ This process, illustrated by Smith's analogy of a "jigsaw puzzle" that can be assembled into different portraits, leads to divergent interpretations, even among those committed to the principle of *Sola Scriptura*.⁴⁶¹ In other words, it suggests that the meaning of biblical texts is not self-evident but rather emerges through the complex interplay of text and reader. As Smith emphasizes, the "semantic indeterminacy"⁴⁶² of the text not only challenges Biblicism's assumption of perspicuity but also affords readers

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 26-27.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., 30.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., 37-38.

⁴⁵⁷ Ibid., 41.

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., 47.

⁴⁶⁰ Ibid., 43-45.

⁴⁶¹ Ibid., 45.

⁴⁶² Ibid., 47.

greater flexibility in their interpretation.

However, Smith clearly acknowledges that this will inevitably lead to disagreements among Christians. He posits that a truly evangelical approach should be Christocentric, focusing on the transformative gospel rather than treating the Bible as a mere handbook or rulebook. This gospel, he emphasizes, challenges assumptions and reshapes lives in light of God's reconciling work through Christ.⁴⁶³ Therefore, Smith proposes a Christocentric hermeneutic, asserting that Jesus Christ is the purpose, center, and interpretive key to scripture.⁴⁶⁴ This approach involves reading the Bible through the lens of Christ, understanding everything in light of God's work in and through him.⁴⁶⁵ Smith supports his argument by citing numerous theologians, many considered evangelical, including Charles Spurgeon, Keith Ward, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, John Webster, John Stott, G.C. Berkouwer, Geoffrey Bromiley, Donald Bloesch, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Peter Enns, who all emphasize the Christocentric nature of scripture.⁴⁶⁶

While Smith proposes a compelling hermeneutical approach that embraces interpretive plurality and diversity while seeking Christ-centered orientation, the effectiveness of this approach in bridging leadership practice and biblical text, particularly its compatibility with the "imagery approach," requires further conversation with biblical scholars.

6.3.2 A Christocentric Hermeneutic: Integrating Scripture, Tradition, and Lived Experience

Smith's approach to biblical interpretation resonates with many biblical scholars who emphasize the importance of ecclesial context, especially regarding the centrality of Christ and the significance of metaphorical thinking. Walter Moberly, in discussing Old Testament theology, argues that addressing the relationship between authority and interpretation requires holding together two distinct yet crucial perspectives: respecting the Hebrew Bible's pre-Christian origins while simultaneously affirming its

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 93-94.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 97-99.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 98-109.

authority within Christianity.⁴⁶⁷ Therefore, a hermeneutical approach must be found that faithfully navigates both perspectives, avoiding both "supersessionism" and "historical reductionism." Moberly's solution is a "reading as" approach acknowledging the Christological lens, whereby a Christian reading seeks to understand how the Hebrew Bible anticipates and points towards Jesus Christ from various perspectives. This approach engages with New Testament interpretations, the legacy of Christian tradition, and dialogue with other interpretations, ultimately grounding the insights derived from scriptural interpretation in Christian life. Moberly's commentary provides an excellent illustration of how to engage with and practice scripture in a multi-faceted, "Christocentric" manner.

Turning to the New Testament, Smith's perspective finds even stronger resonance. New Testament scholar Dale B. Martin shares Smith's critical stance on Biblicism and his emphasis on the interpretive process.⁴⁶⁸ While Martin acknowledges the legitimacy of historical-critical methods in understanding the Bible's historical and cultural context to a greater extent than Smith, he insists that these methods should not be the sole determinant of meaning. The readers, as Martin emphasizes, are the primary agents in creating meaning, rejecting the notion that meaning resides solely within the text or the author's intention. Although Martin's position may appear radical, it, like the work of Smith and Moberly, underscores the significance of interpretation as well as the inescapable responsibility of the interpreter.⁴⁶⁹ As he states:

Those persons who think they are passively "hearing" the text or its message, believing that they "refuse" to push their own beliefs "onto" the text, are actually by that stance taking a more hegemonic epistemological position. They are attempting to mask their own interpretive agency—often even from themselves in a practice of self-deception—by insisting that the interpretation of the text they are advocating is not their own but comes from the "authoritative" agent of the text itself. That is the position of self-delusion and arrogance. It is much more humble to admit that we human beings are

⁴⁶⁷ R. W. L. Moberly, *Old Testament Theology: Reading the Hebrew Bible as Christian Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2013).

⁴⁶⁸ Dale B. Martin, *Biblical Truths: The Meaning of Scripture in the Twenty-first Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

⁴⁶⁹ Martin acknowledges that his thoroughgoing reader-response stance is contested by theologians like Miroslav Volf. However, their disagreement primarily centres on the nature of the text itself, with both acknowledging the necessity of interpretation. See *Ibid.*, 96n34.

constantly seeing the world in our own ways, reading texts through our own eyes, and generating meanings by our practices of reading and interpretation.⁴⁷⁰

Martin envisions an ideal relationship between the church (as interpreter) and the Bible as follows:

Scripture is the *environment* for the church. Scripture is the *space* we inhabit, the sanctuary where we meet God and Jesus by the guidance of the Holy Spirit. ... It is the air we breathe, the water we Christian fish swim in.⁴⁷¹

This imagery of "environment" and "space," emphasizing the church as a lived context, resonates with Paul Minear's work in *Images of the Church in the New Testament*. Minear argues against a purely literal and propositional approach to ecclesiology in the New Testament, advocating instead for understanding the church through the interplay of diverse images. He suggests that these images, much like environment and space, dynamically shape and are shaped by the church's life and its interaction with God. As he states, "The New Testament has an extensive *gallery* of such pictures, many of which effectively delineate the essential links between the life of the church and the diversely hidden workings of God."⁴⁷²

Whether "environment", "space", or "gallery", these vivid depictions of the Bible contrast sharply with the unidirectional "conduit metaphor" criticized by Lakoff and Johnson. They more effectively capture the communal aspect of Smith's Christocentric hermeneutical approach. The Bible becomes a cathedral-like space filled with rich artistic images, bearing witness to historical development and change, with Jesus Christ as the central altar. Individuals within this space—while certainly carrying their own life questions—do not seek direct answers but rather encounter themselves, each other, and the legacy of faith, and through Christ, encounter the Triune God anew within this sacred space. Within this metaphorical space, images can be expressed and communicated. Biblical images such as "shepherd" or "king" can be explored within their historical contexts. Furthermore, engaging with the lessons and experiences of church history can illuminate potential biases in the application of certain images, preventing harm caused by their uncritical misuse.

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid., 99.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid., 94. Italics added.

⁴⁷² Minear, *Images of the Church in the New Testament*, 13. Italics added.

Moreover, these biblical images, their metaphorical meanings, and historical interpretations can interact dynamically with contemporary cultural metaphors, generating transformed new meanings within today's ecclesial context, thus becoming truly "living words" that continuously nourish and shape the church.

A key question remains when prioritizing a Christocentric approach: what image of Christ serves as the lens? John Dominic Crossan's *Jesus and the Violence of Scripture* presents a compelling, albeit challenging, example.⁴⁷³ While advocating a Christocentric hermeneutic, Crossan focuses on a "historical Jesus" characterized by non-violent resistance, largely detached from many evangelical traditions. He uses this image as a filter, prioritizing texts aligned with this ideal. This raises concerns about imposing a specific ideology—however noble—onto scripture, effectively creating a new form of "symbolic authority" where the centrality of Jesus promotes a particular agenda. Moreover, Crossan's approach, often considered excessively liberal, is unlikely to be accepted by Chinese evangelical communities.

This exploration of Biblical Faith has therefore completed the analytical phase of this study's central argument. It has shown how the community's primary theological resource, the Bible, is itself a site of tension between symbolic authority and interpretive diversity, making it both a foundation for identity and a source of conflict. The limitations of a purely Biblicistic approach, especially in navigating the contested images of "Home" and "Soldiers", highlight the need for a more robust theological framework for interpretation and renewal. This sets the stage for the final, constructive task of this thesis. Having analyzed the lived theology of GMBC's leaders, the following chapter will demonstrate how the Christocentric ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer—a theologian Smith himself highlights for his emphasis on the interconnectedness of Christ and community—can provide the necessary resources to transform these images into pathways for a more sustainable and life-giving faith.

⁴⁷³ John Dominic Crossan, *Jesus and the Violence of Scripture: How to Read the Bible and Still Be a Christian* (London: SPCK, 2015).

Chapter 7. A Living Ecclesiology: Bonhoeffer, Images, and the Transformation of the Chinese Church

Following the revised pastoral cycle methodology, I have analyzed the three primary themes—the image of the church, the image of leaders, and the underlying biblical faith—from multiple disciplinary perspectives as a "faith seeking collaboration" endeavor. This chapter integrates these interpretations and insights through a dialogue with Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*. This dialogue connects the lived theology of GMBC with broader ecclesiological tradition, fostering mutual critique and enrichment. Moving from "faith seeking communality in Christ" to "faith seeking transformation," this chapter demonstrates that Bonhoeffer's framework, with its theological solidity and openness to other disciplines—particularly its adaptability and generative capacity regarding metaphorical images—can more deeply connect the lived theology of leadership within a Chinese diasporic church to an incarnational Christology, thereby creating the potential for transformative practice.

7.1 Why Bonhoeffer, why *Sanctorum Communio*

My selection of *Sanctorum Communio* as a dialogue partner for this project stems from two primary reasons: first, Bonhoeffer's relevance to the Chinese church, and second, the promising yet largely untapped theological potential of *Sanctorum Communio*, particularly for the Chinese church.

Bonhoeffer's impact on Chinese churches and theological academia has been significant and enduring, spanning several decades and resonating particularly strongly during times of social and political upheaval. Introduced to Chinese Christian communities through the 1965 Chinese translation of *The Cost of Discipleship* championed by Josephine So (蘇恩佩),⁴⁷⁴ Bonhoeffer's writings offered solace and guidance amidst the tumultuous socio-political climate of Hong Kong

⁴⁷⁴ Lee Man-yiu, *Being for the Other: The Ecclesial and Ethical Dimensions of Bonhoeffer's Theology*, ed. Mazy M. Ng (Cheung Chau, Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 2016).

during the 1960s and 1970s. This era was marked by an influx of refugees, social unrest like the Star Ferry riots and 1967 Leftist riots, and the Cultural Revolution, impacting Hong Kong and mainland China.⁴⁷⁵ As Chin Ken-pa notes, reflecting on the impact of Bonhoeffer during that period, "In that confusing era, he was like a fellowship mentor accompanying us, guiding us on the path of following Christ."⁴⁷⁶ His emphasis on following Christ resonated deeply with a church seeking its purpose in a rapidly changing world.

This influence continues to this day, solidifying Bonhoeffer's role as a significant voice in Chinese Christianity. For decades, Chinese translations of *The Cost of Discipleship* and *Life Together* have remained staples in many Chinese churches, including GMBC. More recently, the 2020 translation of Andrew Root's *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker* resonated particularly strongly in Hong Kong church circles in the aftermath of the 2019 social movements and the COVID-19 pandemic, demonstrating the enduring relevance of his theology to contemporary challenges.⁴⁷⁷ As Chin suggests, despite controversies surrounding Bonhoeffer's theology, "he may be the most profound contemporary theologian influencing the Chinese Church."⁴⁷⁸ The publication of a centennial collection of essays, a unique tribute from Chinese theologians to a "western theologian," further underscores Bonhoeffer's enduring relevance to Chinese theological discourse.⁴⁷⁹

Li Chun Hong identifies a "double neglect" of Bonhoeffer within Chinese churches. First, ecclesiology has been a relatively neglected topic within Chinese theological discourse. Second, Chinese congregations, focusing primarily on the pastoral or late-stage theological aspects of Bonhoeffer's work, have overlooked the practical

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid, 2-3.

⁴⁷⁶ Chin Ken-Pa, "Preface," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sino-Christian Theology*, ed. Chin Ken-Pa (Hong Kong: Logos and Pneuma Press, 2006), 11-12.

⁴⁷⁷ Andrew Root, *Bonhoeffer as Youth Worker: A Theological Vision for Discipleship and Life Together* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2014). Andrew Root, *青少年牧者潘霍華* [Youth Pastor Bonhoeffer], trans. 李小釧 [Li Xiao-Chuan] (Hong Kong: 基督教文藝 [Christian Literature Crusade], 2020).

⁴⁷⁸ Chin, "Preface," 3.

⁴⁷⁹ Chin Ken-Pa, ed., *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sino-Christian Theology* (Hong Kong: Logos and Pneuma Press, 2006).

implications of his ecclesiology.⁴⁸⁰ While Bonhoeffer's theological contributions, particularly his ecclesiology, have been subjects of scholarly investigation within Chinese theological circles, with figures like Andres S. K. Tang and Kwok Hung-biu exploring themes of church and society, further research is needed to translate these theoretical insights into concrete practices for Chinese churches.⁴⁸¹ How can Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology inform the daily life and practices of Chinese congregations? This question, situated at the intersection of Bonhoeffer's theology and the socio-political context of Chinese Christianity, remains a vital area for theological reflection and practical application.

Bonhoeffer's theological thought underwent significant development, but this chapter focuses specifically on his 1927 doctoral dissertation, *Sanctorum Communio: Eine dogmatische Untersuchung (The Communion of Saints: A Theological Study*, hereafter *Sanctorum Communio*). As the English version editor and Bonhoeffer expert Clifford Green notes, this early work lays the groundwork for his later theology, providing the foundation for key concepts that persist even in his *Letters and Papers from Prison*.⁴⁸² Completed at the age of twenty-one, the dissertation explores the nature of the church through a "Christocentric theology of the Christian community," setting ecclesiology "in the midst of a 'theology of sociality.'"⁴⁸³ Its five chapters address social philosophy and sociology, theological anthropology, creation and the "primal state," the impact of sin, and finally, revelation as manifest in the *communio sanctorum*.⁴⁸⁴ The dissertation's methodological clarity is particularly valuable, illuminating Bonhoeffer's integration of theological and socio-historical

⁴⁸⁰ Li Chun Hong, "Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft: Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology," *Logos & Pneuma Chinese Journal of Theology* 23 (Fall 2005):207-227. Li's appeal also resonates with several Chinese theologians regarding the potential of Bonhoeffer's theology to address the intersection of Hong Kong churches and socio-political change, such as: Andres S. K. Tang, *Bonhoeffer the Pastor* (Hong Kong: Logos Publishers, 2017), 270-71. Benedict Kwok Hung-biu, "Forward," in Lee Man-yiu, *Being for the Other*.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.* Some earlier studies, see Andres S. K. Tang, *Bonhoeffer the Pastor* (Hong Kong: Logos Publishers, 2017); Benedict Kwok Hung-biu, "Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology as the Foundation of Public Theology," *Logos & Pneuma Chinese Journal of Theology* 36 (2011); Lee Man-yiu, *Being for the Other*.

⁴⁸² Clifford J. Green, "Editor's Introduction," in *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 1, trans. Reinhard Krauss and Nancy Lukens, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2009), 7.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

concerns, and demonstrating his commitment to Christocentric ecclesiology.⁴⁸⁵ Green highlights core ideas introduced in *Sanctorum Communio*, such as the "concept of person" in ethical relation to the "other", Christian freedom as "being-free-for" the other, the reciprocal relationship of person and community, and the encounter of transcendence in human sociality.⁴⁸⁶ These themes, central to the dissertation, continue to inform his mature thought.

In agreement with Green, contemporary theologian Tom Greggs argues that Bonhoeffer's theological development represents a refinement of his early insights, not a rejection. Greggs traces the development of Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, demonstrating how even later, contested concepts like "religionless Christianity" can be understood in light of his early framework.⁴⁸⁷ The consistency of many early concepts throughout his theological trajectory suggests the enduring adaptability and vitality of the theological construct presented in *Sanctorum Communio*.⁴⁸⁸

The following section examines Bonhoeffer's core theological argument in *Sanctorum Communio*: Christ existing as community. It also analyzes his use of phenomenology to shape his theological construct. Three key theological concepts—collective person, objective spirit, and vicarious representation—will demonstrate how this approach establishes theological solidity. Building on this analysis, I will discuss how Bonhoeffer's theological framework offers a compatible bridge between theological tradition and the lived experience of the church.

7.2 "Christ Existing as Community": Foundations of a Bonhoefferian Ecclesiology

Bonhoeffer's central concept in *Sanctorum Communio*, "Christ existing as (church-)community," strikingly connects two realms: Christ, the central focus of

⁴⁸⁵ Ibid., 2.

⁴⁸⁶ Ibid., 1. See also, Clifford J. Green, *Bonhoeffer: A Theology of Sociality* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 1999).

⁴⁸⁷ Tom Greggs, "Ecclesiology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson, 225–40 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 238-39.

⁴⁸⁸ Ibid., 228-39.

Christian theology, and the lived experience of church community. Before engaging in theological reflection, it is crucial to understand how Bonhoeffer constructs this connection within *Sanctorum Communio*. This involves clarifying, first, his theological methodology and, second, the core theological concepts relevant to this study. A key feature—and challenge—of *Sanctorum Communio* is Bonhoeffer's engagement with then-contemporary sociology—the interdisciplinary dialogue between his systematic theology and his emphasis on lived experience (or "sociality" as described by Green).⁴⁸⁹ This interdisciplinarity informs both his theological methodology and his foundational concepts, and requires careful consideration.

7.2.1 Bonhoeffer's Phenomenological Lens: Theology Engaging with Lived Reality

In *Sanctorum Communio*, Bonhoeffer demonstrates a unique interdisciplinary approach in which phenomenology plays a central role. As Michael Mawson argues, Bonhoeffer's reliance on phenomenology, particularly his engagement with formalist sociology, allows him greater freedom in developing his theological framework.⁴⁹⁰ This pragmatic approach, however, has fueled debate surrounding Bonhoeffer's methodology, particularly given the subsequent decline of formalist sociology within the social sciences.⁴⁹¹ Despite this, Bonhoeffer's phenomenological approach was not merely a fleeting engagement with contemporary academic trends but stemmed from a profound understanding of the relationship between theology and social reality.

Bonhoeffer's phenomenological approach focuses on the "structures of empirical community"⁴⁹² and the "essential structure of social phenomena,"⁴⁹³ rather than the laws governing their formation. He emphasizes that the true subject of sociology is

⁴⁸⁹ Green, *Bonhoeffer*, 21.

⁴⁹⁰ Mawson suggests Bonhoeffer's preference for this school of thought stems from its pragmatic nature, as this school "make fewer normative claims about what human beings are, and therefore fewer claims that are inherently in conflict with a theological anthropology." See Michael Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community: Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 46.

⁴⁹¹ Peter Berger, "Sociology and Ecclesiology," in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (London: SCM Press, [1963]), 53–80.

⁴⁹² SC, 30.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*

the "constitutive structural principles of empirical social forms,"⁴⁹⁴ not their history or regularities. As Mawson suggests, this perspective allows him to "take up insights from formal sociology while rejecting and avoiding any problematic aspects of the underlying social philosophy."⁴⁹⁵ By bracketing historical and causal explanations—what Bonhoeffer terms the "historical-philosophical"⁴⁹⁶ or "genetic"⁴⁹⁷ approaches—Bonhoeffer creates space for a theological interpretation of social reality. This allows him to prioritize attending to social formations "in their givenness, without immediately placing them into a wider interpretative framework,"⁴⁹⁸ and facilitates the application of his theological agenda.⁴⁹⁹ Indeed, Bonhoeffer views phenomenology as a "humanistic" approach concerned with the "structures" and "spirit" of the "empirical communities".⁵⁰⁰ He is interested not only in the external behavior of groups but also in their inner essence—the shared meanings and values that give them life. His interest in the "structure" of community leads to his exploration of the "collective person," while his focus on the "spirit" of community anticipates his later theological concept of "objective spirit" and grounds his ecclesiology.

Bonhoeffer criticizes Durkheim's "descriptive" approach, deeming it insufficient for comprehending the spiritual core of social phenomena.⁵⁰¹ He advocates for a humanistic (*geisteswissenschaftlich*) and phenomenological methodology within sociology, concentrating on the constitutive acts of spirit that shape social structures.⁵⁰² This approach, he contends, transcends the limitations of the genetic approach, which subordinates sociology to history. Although the genetic approach illuminates external laws governing social phenomena, its morphological focus—classifying and cataloging without exploring essential spiritual and structural dimensions—often overlooks the subjective experience and inner essence of

⁴⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁵ Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community*, 46.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid., 43. See SC, 26.

⁴⁹⁷ SC, 30-31.

⁴⁹⁸ SC, 44.

⁴⁹⁹ SC, 45.

⁵⁰⁰ SC, 30.

⁵⁰¹ SC, 30.

⁵⁰² Ibid.

community.⁵⁰³

Bonhoeffer's critique of "descriptive" sociology targets approaches that primarily classify and categorize social phenomena without delving into their underlying meaning and constitutive acts. This differs from later ethnographic approaches in anthropology, such as Geertz's "thick description," which aim to interpret the meaning of cultural practices. Bonhoeffer's phenomenological approach, with its focus on the "structures" and "spirit" of communities, shares similarities with contemporary qualitative research, particularly phenomenology. This approach enables researchers to "understand the situation from the participant's perspective" and explore the lived experience and meaning-making of the group. As many qualitative researchers have noted, phenomenology helps researchers "make the obvious obvious"⁵⁰⁴—the first "obvious" referring to the research topic, the second to the wider community, including the researchers. This connection demonstrates the enduring value of Bonhoeffer's approach in contemporary research.

Despite certain limitations and its provisional nature, Bonhoeffer's work remains relevant today. He makes the strong theological assertion that "Christ exists as community" while simultaneously embracing empirically-oriented epistemological methods. I will further explore how this is achieved through an examination of some of Bonhoeffer's specific concepts in *Sanctorum Communio*.

7.2.2 The "Collective Person": Reimagining Community in Christ

Central to Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology is the concept of the "collective person" (*Kollektivperson*), adopted from the German philosopher Max Scheler, which he uses to articulate the meaning of church community.⁵⁰⁵ Maintaining that "the equal

⁵⁰³ Ibid.

⁵⁰⁴ Svend Brinkmann, *Philosophies of Qualitative Research* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017), 65.

⁵⁰⁵ SC, 77, where Bonhoeffer uses the term *Kollektivperson*, drawing on Scheler's *Gesamtperson*, but emphasizing the interdependence of individual and collective. See Clifford Green's comments in editorial note [52]. For Scheler's original argument, see Max Scheler, *Formalism in Ethics and Non-Formal Ethics of Values: A New Attempt toward the Foundation of an Ethical Personalism*, trans. Manfred S. Frings and Robert L. Funk (Boston: Northwestern University Press, 1973). Bonhoeffer

weight of social and personal being is to be maintained," he asserts, "We maintain that community can be interpreted as a collective person with the same structure as the individual person."⁵⁰⁶ This concept is crucial for understanding Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, especially the identity of the church community. In addressing the dialectic between individual and collective within the community, Bonhoeffer clarifies that the "collective person" is not a separate entity existing above individuals, but a distinct unity existing *alongside* them.⁵⁰⁷ This relates to the inherent "openness" of individuals, their intrinsic need for social interaction to develop self-consciousness and will.⁵⁰⁸ While individuals are "open" to others, requiring them for self-formation, this does not negate their "closedness"—their inherent unity, integrity, and distinctness as centers of intellect and will.⁵⁰⁹ The collective person emerges from this interplay of openness and closedness, where individuals, while remaining distinct, also contribute to and are shaped by a larger unity.

Bonhoeffer further develops a typology of social communities, distinguishing between "community" (*Gemeinschaft*) and "society" (*Gesellschaft*) according to Ferdinand Tönnies.⁵¹⁰ This distinction further clarifies the nature of the collective person. In *Gemeinschaft*, driven by a "will to meaning," the collective person is experienced more intensely.⁵¹¹ The shared values and "reciprocal will" that define *Gemeinschaft* foster a stronger sense of belonging and shared identity within the collective person.⁵¹² The collective person in a community becomes a locus of shared meaning and purpose, shaping the lives of its members in profound ways. However, to fulfill his initial aim of using social theories to support his theological

affirms the concept of collective person for its structural similarity to the individual person, but he critiques Scheler's ethical and genetic interpretations, emphasizing instead the role of Christ's reconciling love and the ongoing, willed nature of community within the church. See also, Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community*, 84.

Franklin Sherman, "Act and Being," in *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, ed. Martin E. Marty (London: SCM Press, 1963), 83–108.

⁵⁰⁶ SC, 77-78.

⁵⁰⁷ SC, 105.

⁵⁰⁸ SC, 65-72.

⁵⁰⁹ SC, 73-75.

⁵¹⁰ Bonhoeffer borrows Tönnies's terminology but rejects his "genetic" approach, emphasizing instead the constitutive acts of will. See SC, 87-89.

⁵¹¹ "Will to meaning" denotes a will oriented toward the inherent value of being-with-one-another, rather than an external goal. See SC, 88-89.

⁵¹² It refers to the individuals' will to one another in a group. See SC, 83.

concept of "Christ existing as church-community," Bonhoeffer ultimately rooted his understanding of the collective person as church-community in Apostle Paul's "body of Christ" image.⁵¹³

However, some scholars, such as Franklin Sherman, consider Bonhoeffer "unduly dependent" on this sociological notion (say, the "collective person" from Scheler), viewing it merely as a "modern equivalent" to Paul's "Body of Christ" and questioning the depth of Bonhoeffer's engagement with the concept.⁵¹⁴ However, Michael Mawson, while acknowledging that Bonhoeffer's ideas "broadly draw upon the phenomenology of Max Scheler,"⁵¹⁵ emphasizes Bonhoeffer's original contribution. Mawson suggests that Bonhoeffer develops the concept significantly, particularly in its connection to Christology and vicarious representation, offering a more nuanced account than Scheler's original formulation. This highlights the need for a closer examination of how Bonhoeffer creatively adapts and transforms Scheler's concept within his own theological framework.

In his chapter "The Primal State and the Problem of Community," Bonhoeffer engages in a sustained critique of Scheler's sociology, particularly its application to the Church.⁵¹⁶ He challenges Scheler's "formalism," arguing that its abstract deduction of religious community from the indivisibility of the "holy" fails to account for the concrete, historical revelation of God in Christ.⁵¹⁷ In contrast, Bonhoeffer insists on grounding the Church's reality not in abstract principles but in the specific content of Christian revelation.⁵¹⁸ He also critiques Scheler's understanding of corporate culpability, preferring a dynamic, will-based account that emphasizes individual responsibility within the community without dismissing shared guilt.⁵¹⁹

Furthermore, Bonhoeffer challenges Scheler's concept of love as "solidarity," arguing

⁵¹³ SC, 138.

⁵¹⁴ Sherman, "Act and Being," 102-03.

⁵¹⁵ Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community*, 84.

⁵¹⁶ See SC, 58-106.

⁵¹⁷ SC, 128n5.

⁵¹⁸ Ibid.

⁵¹⁹ Bonhoeffer tends to agree with Scheler on corporate culpability but rejects its grounding in a static, Platonic understanding of good and evil. See SC, 116.

that true Christian love is rooted in Christ's vicarious representative action.⁵²⁰ This difference stems from their divergent Christologies and understandings of salvation. Perhaps their most significant divergence concerning the collective person lies in Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the equal weight of individual and social being, grounding the Church's unity in the shared life in Christ rather than a pre-existing social substance.⁵²¹ These critiques, while demonstrating Bonhoeffer's indebtedness to Scheler's concept of the collective person, also highlight his distinct theological perspective. This divergence reveals a fundamental theological gap in Scheler's treatment of the fall, redemption, and the sanctification of community—a gap Bonhoeffer bridges with the “vicarious representative” action of Christ.

Returning to Sherman's critique, which suggests Bonhoeffer's use of Scheler's "collective person" concept is a superficial borrowing, Bonhoeffer's statement on the collective person and the "body of Christ" merits re-examination:

For Paul, only Christ exists 'before' and 'above' the individuals. He looks at the church from the perspective of the collective person (*Gesamtperson*), that of 'Christ existing as church-community'. In speaking of our being Christ's body, we need to remember the definition of the body as a functional concept; that is, we are governed by Christ in the same way that I govern my body. But the Christ who governs us leads us to serve each other (*Dienst aneinander*). From this it follows that applying the idea of organism to the church is misleading and should therefore be avoided.⁵²²

Here, Bonhoeffer connects the concept of the collective person with the Pauline image, not simply as a modern equivalent, but rather uses the former to clarify the limitations of the latter metaphor, emphasizing its manifestation in communal interaction and relationships. Bonhoeffer's further construction of "Christ existing as community" relies on his subsequent development of "vicarious representation" and the renewal of "objective spirit" within his theological framework. We now turn to these two themes.

7.2.3 From Sinners to Saints: Vicarious Representation and Objective Spirit in

⁵²⁰ SC, 146-47n12.

⁵²¹ SC, 77-79, 103-4.

⁵²² SC, 138.

Bonhoeffer's Ecclesiology

Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, like that of many Protestant theologians, grapples with the tension between the ideal of the *communio sanctorum* and the reality of the *peccatorum communio*.⁵²³ Central to his understanding of this tension are the concepts of "vicarious representation" and "objective spirit." These concepts address the fundamental brokenness of human existence caused by sin, both as an individual act and a universal condition inherited "in Adam." This brokenness fractures human relationships and isolates individuals from God and one another, creating a distorted community where the intended structure of human existence—the "collective person"—exists in a state of fragmentation.⁵²⁴ Thus, understanding the Church as a community of saints requires confronting its simultaneous existence as a community of sinners. The following discussion will explore the interdisciplinary insights offered by Bonhoeffer's concepts of vicarious representation and objective spirit as they relate to this fundamental ecclesiological challenge.

Bonhoeffer's concept of "vicarious representation" begins with his argument that Christ's act on the cross is not merely an example of solidarity or moral heroism, but rather a true substitution.⁵²⁵ Christ takes our place, bearing the penalty for sin and overcoming the isolating power of guilt.⁵²⁶ This act of vicarious representation is the decisive turning point, the bridge from the *communio peccatorum* to the possibility of the *sanctorum communio*.⁵²⁷ It is the foundational act of reconciliation, restoring the broken relationship between humanity and God. Crucially, this is not a humanly achievable act of self-sacrifice, but a divine act of love, made possible only through Christ's unique relationship with the Father.⁵²⁸

Within this Christological narrative, Bonhoeffer develops the theological implications of "objective spirit," a concept he introduced earlier in his discussion of the "primal

⁵²³ See the chapter "Sin and Broken Community", SC, 107-21.

⁵²⁴ SC, 124.

⁵²⁵ SC, 147-50.

⁵²⁶ SC, 156.

⁵²⁷ SC, 145-46.

⁵²⁸ SC, 171.

state of community," to explain how this reconciliation manifests in the empirical life of the Church.⁵²⁹ Borrowing the term from Hegel as a general sociological concept but reworking it theologically, Bonhoeffer uses "objective spirit" to describe the shared life, traditions, and structures of the Church community.⁵³⁰ It is the "bearer of historical tradition," shaping individuals within the community and providing the context for their interactions.⁵³¹ However, unlike Hegel's notion of an independent and evolving entity, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that the objective spirit of the Church is not inherently good or autonomous.⁵³² It is subject to sin and imperfection, reflecting the ongoing reality of the *peccatorum communio* within the *sanctorum communio*.⁵³³

The significance of this transformation becomes apparent when considering the interplay between "vicarious representation" and "objective spirit". While Christ's vicarious act provides the *motivation*—the basis for reconciliation—the objective spirit provides the *medium*—the context in which this reconciliation is lived out. The objective spirit, despite its imperfections, serves as a "bearer and instrument" of the Holy Spirit.⁵³⁴ It is through this Spirit-filled, yet flawed, objective spirit that members of the Church are empowered to live out Christ's vicarious love for one another. This takes concrete form in mutual burden-bearing, intercessory prayer, and the forgiveness of sins.⁵³⁵ In Bonhoeffer's eyes, these practices are not merely moral duties but participatory acts, reflecting Christ's love and continuing his work of reconciliation within the community.

Clearly, Bonhoeffer envisions the Church not as a utopian ideal or fully realized state, but as an ongoing process of becoming. It exists within the tension inherent in a "collective person of sinners", continually striving toward the "collective person of

⁵²⁹ SC, 97-100.

⁵³⁰ As Bonhoeffer states, "[t]he empirical church ... manifests the church-community's objective spirit in its being and becoming, in transmitted forms and structures, and in current vitality and activity." SC, 208-9.

⁵³¹ SC, 209.

⁵³² "Thus we have, on the one hand, the ever-changing, imperfect, sinful, objective human spirit; on the other hand we have the Holy Spirit who bears this human spirit, and is eternally one and perfect, and we have 'Christ existing as church-community'." SC, 215-16.

⁵³³ SC, 216.

⁵³⁴ SC, 216.

⁵³⁵ SC, 180-82.

Christ". Christ's vicarious act provides the foundation, while the Spirit's work within the "objective spirit" empowers the community to embody this reconciliation and enact "vicarious representation" within its members. Through this dynamic interplay, the Church, despite its inherent imperfections, embodies and enacts God's reconciling love within the world—in other words, the realization of "Christ existing as community."

Current interdisciplinary debate surrounding 'vicarious representation' and 'objective spirit' often centers on the latter concept. Michael Welker, for instance, critiques Bonhoeffer's appropriation of the Hegelian "objective spirit," tracing its roots back to Aristotle's *nous*. He argues that its inherent self-referentiality, inherited from this philosophical lineage, contrasts sharply with the other-directed nature of the biblical Holy Spirit, which consistently points towards Christ and God the Father.⁵³⁶ Furthermore, Welker contends that Bonhoeffer's "objective spirit," operating at the level of the "collective person," struggles to fully account for the diverse and unique ways the Holy Spirit works in and through individuals.⁵³⁷ However, as Mawson clarifies, Bonhoeffer carefully distinguishes these concepts, positing "objective spirit" as a *vehicle* for the Holy Spirit, without equating or conflating the two, despite their apparent similarity. While primarily a theological concept grounded in Christ's substitutionary atonement, "vicarious representation" also functions, arguably, as a phenomenological tool within Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology. It illuminates the unique culture, ethos, and practices, resonating with certain perspectives in contemporary organizational studies.⁵³⁸

Furthermore, based on my direct engagement with Max Scheler's work, I suggest that Bonhoeffer, in rejecting Schelerian 'solidarity,' may overlook some of its potential

⁵³⁶ Michael Welker, *God the Revealed: Christology*, trans. Douglas W. Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 170n4. Michael Welker, "Bonhoeffer's geniale frühe Ekklesiologie," in *Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Sino-Christian Theology*, ed. Chin Ken-Pa (Hong Kong: Logos and Pneuma Press, 2006), 37–54.

⁵³⁷ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

⁵³⁸ Contemporary organizational research utilizes the concept of "collective personality" to describe an organization's conscientiousness, routines, emotional stability, and behavioral patterns, analogous to an individual's personality. This concept, while superficially similar to "collective person," may share more common ground with Bonhoeffer's notion of "objective spirit." For instance, see David A. Hofmann and Lisa M. Jones, "Leadership, Collective Personality, and Performance," *American Psychologist* 90, no. 3 (2005): 509–22.

for enriching our understanding of vicarious representation. While "vicarious representation" may seem a straightforward, classical Protestant Christological concept, Bonhoeffer's critique of Max Scheler's notion of "solidarity" reveals a more nuanced understanding. Scheler's concept of the "collective person," which emphasizes shared values as the foundation of relationships and solidarity, contains a significant "vicarious" element itself. For Scheler, these shared values are not abstract doctrines but lived, experiential "feeling-states" integral to personal being.⁵³⁹ He argues that individuals within a genuine collective person exhibit both "vicarious feeling" (*Nachfühlen*), an empathetic understanding of another's emotions, and "co-feeling" (*Miteinanderfühlen*), a shared experience of mental states. This bond of shared feelings, culminating in the broader concept of co-experiencing (*Miteinandererleben*), forms the core of Schelerian collective personhood.⁵⁴⁰ Solidarity, then, arises not from pragmatic agreement but from shared participation in the lived values of personhood. In contrast, Bonhoeffer's concept of "vicarious representation," centered on Christ's unique, substitutionary act, seemingly overlooks the dimension of shared feeling and experience, potentially due to his (perhaps overstated) rejection of Schelerian "solidarity." However, this crucial element echoing the compassion of Jesus Christ must be reintegrated for a robust practical consideration.

7.2.4 Bridging Theology and Reality: Bonhoeffer's Christological Approach

When engaging Bonhoeffer's theology with the Chinese church, it is crucial to recognize that his ecclesiology, while deeply rooted in his Lutheran heritage, exhibits a particular dynamic. As Greggs observes, Bonhoeffer inherits established notions of ministerial roles, particularly concerning preaching and sacraments, traceable to the *Sanctorum Communio*.⁵⁴¹ However, within this established framework, Bonhoeffer also recognizes the church's adaptability, allowing modifications to its polity and

⁵³⁹ Scheler, *Formalism*, 508.

⁵⁴⁰ Scheler, *Formalism*, 534. See also, Alessandro Salice, "Collective Intentionality and the Collective Person in Max Scheler," in *Analytic and Continental Philosophy: Methods and Perspectives. Proceedings of the 37th International Wittgenstein Symposium*, vol. 23, *Publications of the Austrian Ludwig Wittgenstein Society – New Series*, ed. Sonja Rinofner-Kreidl and Harald A. Wiltsche (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2016), 277–88.

⁵⁴¹ Greggs, "Ecclesiology," 238.

structure to meet specific needs.⁵⁴² This flexibility, while respecting the divinely ordained nature of church organization, permits diverse expressions of ministry within different communities.

The preceding subsections of this chapter have provided a thorough examination of Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*, revealing that this inherent flexibility is rooted in his theological approach, characterized by both strong interdisciplinary openness and a deep Christological foundation. This final subsection further clarifies the distinctiveness of his constructive approach and discusses its application to this study. It demonstrates how Bonhoeffer's theology in *Sanctorum Communio* can serve as a bridge, integrating the preceding chapters' analyses and informing the task of the pastoral circle as "faith seeking connection in Christ," by engaging the ethnographic findings of lived theology and facilitating more robust theological integration.

The Bonhoefferian “Faith Seeking Understanding”

Bonhoeffer's distinctive approach in *Sanctorum Communio*, succinctly described as "faith seeking understanding" anchored in his incarnational Christology, yields a robust yet dialogical framework, making it valuable for contemporary theological reflection.

Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann characterize Bonhoeffer's theological approach, which they term "Christian phenomenology of society," as a prime example of "faith seeking understanding" in his engagement with contemporary philosophical thought.⁵⁴³ Given the discussion of Bonhoeffer's methodology in 7.2.1, this section emphasizes Gregor and Zimmermann's accurate characterization of his framework: for Bonhoeffer, theology precedes and guides the pursuit of understanding. His approach, which they term a "redescription of philosophy," utilizes philosophical concepts to illuminate pre-existing faith commitments rather than establishing neutral philosophical grounds for theology. As Bonhoeffer states:

⁵⁴² Ibid.

⁵⁴³ Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Cruciform Philosophy," in *Bonhoeffer and Continental Thought: Cruciform Philosophy*, ed. Brian Gregor and Jens Zimmermann (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 3, 5.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, it should be noted that this study of the *sanctorum communio* does not properly belong to the sociology of religion, but to theology. It will be carried out on the foundation of Christian theology and will make fruitful for theology the fundamental insights that derive purely from social philosophy and sociology, as well as the sociology of religion. Hence our purpose is to understand the structure of the given reality of a church of Christ, as revealed in Christ, from the perspective of social philosophy and sociology.⁵⁴⁴

Despite emphasizing this "top-down" asymmetry, Bonhoeffer demonstrates respect for and deep engagement with other disciplines, rather than imposing theological ideas upon them. Gregor and Zimmermann caution that a superficial reading might suggest a "Christocratic" model, where all intellectual activity is subservient to Christ—an impression easily, though mistakenly, gleaned from *Sanctorum Communio*.⁵⁴⁵ They argue that Bonhoeffer himself was acutely aware of the risk of such theological triumphalism, and addressed this concern, particularly in his later work, by distinguishing between the "ultimate" and the "penultimate."⁵⁴⁶ For Bonhoeffer, ultimate reality resides in God's creation as it is affirmed by the incarnation, judged by the cross, and redeemed by Christ's resurrection. This Christocentric framework emphasizes the world's ultimate dependence upon and unification in Christ, rather than a subservience to a belief system in the name of Christ.

In essence, Bonhoeffer's incarnational Christology forms a crucial bridge between Christian theology and social reality. Because God, through Christ, entered the world, the Christian life is inherently worldly.⁵⁴⁷ The supernatural is found within the natural, the holy within the profane, and the revelational within the rational.⁵⁴⁸ This interconnectedness forms the bedrock of *Sanctorum Communio's* concept of "Christ existing as community."⁵⁴⁹ This incarnational lens, as Gregor and Zimmermann argue, drives Bonhoeffer's commitment to unfolding faith through philosophical

⁵⁴⁴ SC, 31-33.

⁵⁴⁵ Gregor and Zimmermann, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Cruciform Philosophy," 7-10.

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 7, 15-16.

⁵⁴⁷ As the authors state, "[j]ust as the reality of God has entered the reality of the world in Christ, what is Christian cannot be had otherwise than in what is worldly, the 'supernatural' only in the natural, the holy only in the profane, the revelational only in the rational." *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 5.

inquiry. They emphasize that Bonhoeffer's faith does not seek understanding within an isolated theological discourse, occasionally assisted by other disciplines. Instead, he dynamically reinterprets and reconstructs theological concepts through engagement with other disciplines—a process Gregor and Zimmermann term the "redescription of philosophy."⁵⁵⁰

Central to this theological reconstruction is Bonhoeffer's incarnational Christology, encompassing the narrative of Christ's salvation throughout *Sanctorum Communio*.⁵⁵¹ This Christology profoundly shapes Bonhoeffer's understanding of reality, emphasizing the world's unification in Christ and the intertwining of the secular and sacred.⁵⁵² Christian life, then, becomes participation in the life of Christ, establishing a Christocentric connection between theology and lived experience.⁵⁵³

Incarnational Christology as an Anchor

Bonhoeffer's approach, grounded in his incarnational Christology, offers a compelling perspective that contrasts with some of the theological approaches examined in previous chapters. As Gregor and Zimmermann observe, Bonhoeffer's theology fosters a confident desire to cherish "freedom of thought" in "a world come of age"—interpreted by them as "a world no longer afraid to utilize its own understanding."⁵⁵⁴ This encourages active engagement with other disciplines, rather than dismissing them as simply secular or non-Christian.⁵⁵⁵ This perspective proves particularly helpful for addressing Chloe Lynch's "fear of managerialism" (discussed in chapter 5). While acknowledging the influence of consumerism on organizational leadership theories and management techniques, Bonhoeffer's incarnational theology provides an imperative to actively participate in, "redescribe," and thereby bridge and transform these theories, rather than rejecting them outright. Whereas previous discussions offered an empirical, "bottom-up" defense of the value of leadership theories, Bonhoeffer provides a theological rationale for engagement and

⁵⁵⁰ Ibid., 9.

⁵⁵¹ Ibid., 18.

⁵⁵² Ibid., 9.

⁵⁵³ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁵⁴ Ibid., 16-17.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid.

transformation.

This emphasis on engagement also distinguishes Bonhoeffer from theologians like Ray S. Anderson (discussed in chapter 4), whose ecclesiology, as Gregor and Zimmermann note, might be considered a form of "radicalism" that limits the role of philosophy in theological reflection.⁵⁵⁶ While both Bonhoeffer and Anderson emphasize the doctrine of incarnation, their approaches diverge significantly. Anderson's overemphasis on the kenotic dimension hinders the integration of abstract theological concepts with lived experience and limits his engagement with broader social theories and empirical research, leading to what he himself terms an "orthopedic device" theology.⁵⁵⁷ By contrast, Bonhoeffer understands the incarnation not merely as a historical event, but as an ongoing reality continuously experienced within the reflections of the church community.⁵⁵⁸ This ongoing process of "faith seeking understanding," amidst the dynamism of lived reality, allows the church to authentically grasp and enact both the kenotic and ecstatic dimensions of its mission.

In Gregor and Zimmermann's view, Bonhoeffer's incarnational Christology allows him to overcome dichotomies such as "immanence and transcendence, ontology and ethics, reflection and existence, sameness and difference, full participation in the divine, and the inherent ambiguity and risk of its hermeneutical unfolding in theology."⁵⁵⁹ This integrative approach contributes to, rather than rejects, contemporary disciplines.

The Contemporary Relevance of *Sanctorum Communio*

Criticisms of Bonhoeffer's methodology, particularly his reliance on phenomenology, have been raised, most notably by Peter Berger. Berger argues that the "formalistic school" of German sociology Bonhoeffer draws upon is overly abstract and speculative, and somehow outdated.⁵⁶⁰ While Berger's critique captures a certain

⁵⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁵⁵⁷ Anderson, *Shape of Practical Theology*, 29. See also, Ward, *Introducing Practical Theology*, 89.

⁵⁵⁸ Gregor and Zimmermann, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Cruciform Philosophy," 9.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁶⁰ Berger emphasizes that the sociology Bonhoeffer "describes as phenomenological," particularly "the so-called formalistic school" then prominent in Germany, "is not a historical but a systematic

aspect of *Sanctorum Communio*, it remains too literal, failing to appreciate the enduring potential of Bonhoeffer's ideas to transcend their historical context and engage with contemporary thought.

Indeed, a growing number of scholars have noted Bonhoeffer's continued relevance. For example, Mawson compares Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* with the emerging movement in ethnography and ecclesiology, highlighting their shared focus not only on academic constructs but also on serving explicitly Christian and theological accounts of the church.⁵⁶¹ Mawson's insight effectively highlights the contemporary relevance of *Sanctorum Communio*, despite its seemingly more systematic theological approach compared to works like *Life Together* or *Ethics*.

David Emerton offers a further nuanced perspective on Bonhoeffer's bridging potential.⁵⁶² Rather than simply deconstructing Bonhoeffer's work, Emerton situates it within the broader landscape of modern ecclesiology.⁵⁶³ He identifies a problematic divide in contemporary ecclesiology between approaches that overemphasize either divine agency (dogmatic) or human agency (ethnographic). Emerton develops a four-quadrant typology, distinguishing between "hard" and "soft" variations within both dogmatic and ethnographic perspectives. He argues that each quadrant, while offering valuable insights, ultimately proves insufficient by overemphasizing either divine or human agency. Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology, Emerton suggests, offers a corrective "third way," transcending this dichotomy.⁵⁶⁴

Building upon these discussions, a crucial element overlooked by Berger emerges: Bonhoeffer's capacity for dialogue and engagement with lived reality stems not primarily from his philosophical knowledge or theoretical constructions, but from his incarnational Christology. This Christocentric perspective, anchored in and focused

discipline," operating on a "very high level of abstraction" and thus "very easily to speculative systemizing." Peter Berger, 'Sociology and Ecclesiology', in *The Place of Bonhoeffer*, ed. Martin Marty (New York: Association Press, 1962), 58–59.

⁵⁶¹ See Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community*, 183-6.

⁵⁶² David Emerton, *God's Church-Community: The Ecclesiology of Dietrich Bonhoeffer* (London: T & T Clark, 2020).

⁵⁶³ Emerton, *God's Church-Community*, 3-52.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

through "Christ existing in community," empowers both scholars and the church to examine a changing world—emerging theories, complex lived experiences, and diverse theological trends—through a Christological lens, providing both a vision for and the confidence in such engagement.

It should be noted that Bonhoeffer's theological discourse in *Sanctorum Communio* is not inherently metaphorical. Therefore, the following discussion will explore the potential of a metaphorical approach, using the central lens of incarnational Christology to further reflect upon metaphorical images derived from ethnographic data, thereby setting the stage for subsequent analysis.

7.3 The Power of Images: A Christocentric Approach to Ecclesial Metaphors

After exploring Bonhoeffer's foundational concepts and their interdisciplinary potential, this section explores how Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* informs a metaphorical approach to leadership. I argue that Bonhoeffer's concept of "Christ existing as church-community" is not only a proclamation of ecclesial reality but also a critical lens for integrating the diverse images that shape perceptions of church and leadership. I compare this lens with common Trinitarian analogies of the church, assessing their respective strengths and weaknesses, and offer a Christocentric framework—specifically, a theological reimagining of the Chinese church—that seeks to navigate the complexities of imagery and foster deeper engagement with lived faith.

7.3.1 "Christ Existing as Community": The Foundational Image

As previously discussed, Bonhoeffer's concept of "Christ existing as church-community" is not merely a theological assertion but a lived ecclesial reality. Beyond signifying the transcendent reality of Christ's presence, it also acknowledges the subjective and experiential dimensions of this reality, particularly in interpersonal relationships. While Bonhoeffer does not explicitly frame it as such, this project utilizes and reframes the concept of "Christ existing as church-community" as a

crucial lens for interpreting other ecclesial metaphors and images, and as a foundational image shaping the church's self-understanding and its understanding of leadership.

As Bonhoeffer acknowledges, the church is a collective person—not just any, but the unique collective person of Christ. Like other collective entities, the lived experience of the church-community encompasses rich interpersonal interactions, organizational structures and affairs, and engagement with societal realities individually or collectively. While the full revelation of Christ's presence within these dimensions awaits the eschaton,⁵⁶⁵ as Bonhoeffer notes, it is nonetheless confessed and embraced by the church-community in the present. Moreover, the image of Christ as this particular collective person is not only allowed but also intended to be experienced and lived out.

The manifestation of the image of Christ in the empirical communities is through "vicarious representation." Historically rooted in Christ's vicarious redemptive act, and continually empowered by the Holy Spirit, Christians "become Christ" to their neighbors through acts of love and service. These intriguing examples are particularly evident when Bonhoeffer extends Christ's "vicarious representation" to the dynamics of church relationships: Christians can and ought to *act like* Christ; they ought to bear the burdens and sufferings of the neighbor.⁵⁶⁶

It must come to the point that the weaknesses, needs, and sins of my neighbor afflict me as if they were my own, *in the same way as* Christ was afflicted by our sins.⁵⁶⁷

In our intercession *we can become a Christ* to our neighbor.⁵⁶⁸

"Likeness" here is the key to the metaphorical connection between Christ and the church community. Within these everyday, even implicit, expressions of Christlikeness, against the backdrop of the "collective person of sinners," these actions progressively clarify and complete the image of Christ, making "Christ existing as community" increasingly visible to the world. This can also be understood as the Holy Spirit shaping the objective spirit of the community through the individual spirits of its diverse members, revealing a unifying face of Christ within their diversity.

⁵⁶⁵ SC, 147.

⁵⁶⁶ SC, 179.

⁵⁶⁷ SC, 119.

⁵⁶⁸ SC, 187.

The progression of "becoming a Christ" clearly demonstrates the intimate connection Bonhoeffer envisions between the ethical actions of Christians and Christ himself. This is particularly evident in the statement, "Whoever lives in love *is* Christ in relation to the neighbor—but, of course, always only in this respect"⁵⁶⁹. While Bonhoeffer qualifies his statement with "always only in this respect"—referring to the act of loving service—this qualification underscores that, for him, the claim remains true, not ontologically or objectively, but rather (inter)subjectively, analogically, and experientially. Dustin Benac terms this Christ-driven, practical perspective a "Christo-ecclesial vision," which, while more concretely articulated in Bonhoeffer's *Life Together*, is theologically grounded in *Sanctorum Communio*.⁵⁷⁰

It is important to note that Bonhoeffer does not explicitly state that the "collective person" itself collectively acts as Christ in the same way that individuals can. However, considering Bonhoeffer's theology as a whole, a "both/and" approach seems applicable to the relationship between the Church and Christ. "Christ existing as community" is both ontological and analogical/imagery-based: the former anchors the latter, while the latter makes the former visible, albeit imperfectly, within the lived experience of the community. In other words, the Christo-ecclesial vision indicates that the church community can experience reality as a bearer of the image of Christ in action.

7.3.2 Beyond Trinitarian Analogies: A Christ-Focused Perspective

Recalling the task "faith seeking communality in Christ" in this pastoral cycle, it is beneficial to engage with other theological traditions regarding ecclesiological imagery. Crucially, the compelling analogy of the Holy Trinity must inform this intra-Christian dialogue. This doctrine not only represents the ultimate authority within the Christian faith, signifying the unique divine essence of God, but also exemplifies the most perfect form of interpersonal relationship. In Chapter 5, Chloe Lynch uses the doctrine of the Trinity to illustrate her concept of leadership as friendship. She highlights the differentiated yet harmonious relationships within the Trinity,

⁵⁶⁹ SC, 178, italic original.

⁵⁷⁰ Dustin Benac, "A Bonhoefferian Approach to Social Analysis: *Life Together* as *Communio*, Relation, and Possibility," *The Bonhoeffer Legacy: An International Journal* 5, no. 2 (2019): 63–82.

acknowledging its asymmetrical characteristics to emphasize authentic reciprocity over absolute equality. Similarly, in Chapter 4, Alexander Chow employs a Trinitarian perspective drawing on Zizioulas to enrich the understanding of relationships within the hierarchy of the Chinese familial archetype, moving beyond mere obedience to encompass mutual enrichment. While they engage with the analogical approach, they refrain from explicitly using the term "image" in this context.

Miroslav Volf explores the concept of "image" to establish an analogy between the empirical church and the Holy Trinity.⁵⁷¹ He aims to articulate a Trinitarian understanding of the church, demonstrating how even a small gathering in Christ's name can represent an εἰκών ("image") of the Trinity, and the core of the imagery connection lies in reflecting the relationality of the Trinity.⁵⁷² As Volf argues, the three divine persons are defined by their relationships of love and mutual indwelling (*perichoresis*).⁵⁷³ The Church, likewise, is called to be a community defined by loving relationships, including the communal life in the Spirit and the practice of mutual giving and receiving.⁵⁷⁴

Despite their differing perspectives and approaches to analogy, Volf and Bonhoeffer demonstrate significant convergences in their fundamental ecclesiological understandings. Both emphatically stress the relational nature of the Church, highlight the Holy Spirit's formative and practical role within the community, and understand "image" not merely as a descriptive portrayal but as a catalyst for ethical action. Of course, these scholars employ this approach with considerable caution, given the unique and singular nature of the Holy Trinity.

Volf unequivocally positions the Church as the image, not the Trinity, within the analogy. He states his goal is "to sketch out the trinitarian foundation of a non-individualistic Protestant ecclesiology".⁵⁷⁵ Volf's argument consistently emphasizes the directionality of the analogy: the Trinity illuminates the Church, not vice versa.⁵⁷⁶

⁵⁷¹ Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Chicago: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1997).

⁵⁷² *Ibid.*, 197.

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, 208-14.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 212-13.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁵⁷⁶ See, *Ibid.*, 197.

While Volf distinguishes between our notions of the triune God and the triune God itself—"our notions of the triune God are not the triune God, even if God is accessible to us only in these notions"⁵⁷⁷—his use of such notions to understand intra-ecclesial relationships remains fundamentally analogical.

While such direct or indirect analogical applications of the Trinity offer valuable insights and challenge limiting conceptions of relationships, sparking new possibilities, their limitations and potential risks warrant careful consideration. Karen Kilby offers helpful critiques of what she terms "social Trinitarianism," a trend in contemporary theology that confidently utilizes the Trinitarian pattern as an analogy for understanding various concepts, from human relationships to political structures.⁵⁷⁸ Kilby argues that this analogical overreach is not only theologically unsound and based on misinterpretations of tradition, but also potentially dangerous.

One of Kilby's central arguments is that the doctrine of the Trinity functions primarily as a grammatical structure within Christian discourse, not as a descriptive image of God's inner life.⁵⁷⁹ This "grammar" formulates the appropriate way for speaking about God, particularly regarding the divinity of Christ and the Spirit while maintaining monotheism.⁵⁸⁰ However, according to Kilby, it does not provide a comprehensive grasp of what the Trinity actually is. Kilby insists that this is rooted in the historical development of the doctrine, which emerged from Christological controversies in the patristic period, not from a desire to probe God's inner being.⁵⁸¹ Kilby challenges the analogous use of the Trinity, particularly the social model, to project contemporary ideals onto God.⁵⁸² She argues that social Trinitarians, in their attempts to explain the unity of the three persons, often fill the concept of *perichoresis* (mutual indwelling) with notions borrowed from human experience – love, empathy, mutual giving, etc. This, she argues, leads to a circular process: a

⁵⁷⁷ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁷⁸ Karen Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection: Problems with Social Doctrines of the Trinity," *New Blackfriars* 81, no. 957 (October 2000): 432–45. This critique has been further developed in her recent work, *God, Evil, and the Limits of Theology* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020).

⁵⁷⁹ Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection," 438.

⁵⁸⁰ Kilby, *God, Evil, and the Limits of Theology*, 26–27.

⁵⁸¹ Kilby, "Perichoresis and Projection," 441–42.

⁵⁸² Ibid., 442.

concept used to name what is not understood is filled with human content and then presented as a divine revelation about how humans should relate.

Kilby further notes that this line of reasoning, starting as an attempt to explain a theological difficulty, becomes a source of supposed insight into ideal human behavior. This can have serious consequences, potentially legitimizing certain social or political structures based on a projected image of God.⁵⁸³ Kilby's critique aligns precisely with my earlier reflections on biblical authority: when a concept becomes an authoritative symbol used to justify the transitivity of specific beliefs, problems inevitably arise.

In contrast, while Bonhoeffer's Christology and pneumatology in *Sanctorum Communio* are considered richly Trinitarian in substance,⁵⁸⁴ he does not explicitly articulate the doctrine of the Trinity or directly connect it to his concept of community within this particular work. This may represent an area for further development in his thought. However, his more focused Christocentric approach potentially circumvents some of the risks Kilby critiques as inherent in "social Trinitarianism." By grounding ecclesiology in the concrete, historical life and ministry of Christ, Bonhoeffer avoids the complexities and potential misinterpretations inherent in abstract Trinitarian analogies. The scriptural image of Christ, embodied by his followers, provides a more accessible foundation for understanding the church's identity and mission. Furthermore, Bonhoeffer's Christological lens emphasizes practical application, particularly in church leadership. The concept of "becoming a Christ" to one's neighbor, as previously discussed, directly links ecclesial identity with ethical action. This emphasis on Christlikeness offers a clear criterion for evaluating ecclesial images: do they foster Christlikeness and promote vicarious practices like burden-bearing, intercession, and forgiveness? These questions, rooted in Bonhoeffer's Christology, provide a practical test for ecclesial metaphors.

This does not diminish the value of Trinitarian reflections on the church. Rather, both Trinitarian and Christological perspectives underscore that while the church's ontological unity is established in Christ, its full expression and ethical fulfillment

⁵⁸³ Ibid.

⁵⁸⁴ Holmes, "The Holy Spirit," 168.

within its socio-historical context remains an ongoing process. These transcendent, "top-down" metaphorical images illuminate the "bottom-up" images arising from lived theologies, helping to clarify their specific meanings and limitations, and enabling their integration into a richer, more comprehensive ecclesiological understanding. However, these transcendent, "top-down" images illuminate the "bottom-up" images arising from lived theologies. This illumination helps clarify the specific meanings and limitations of these lived images, enabling their integration into a richer, more comprehensive ecclesiological understanding.

7.3.3 Transforming Images in Christ: A Pathway to Renewal

Returning to practical considerations, how can this Bonhoefferian Christ-ecclesial vision, or the image of "Christ existing as community", address the various metaphorical images of, within, and concerning church and its leadership? The inevitable challenge becomes integrating the rich, multifaceted, and often tension-filled themes of lived faith narratives around the focal image of Christ.

Two misconceptions, however, must first be avoided. The first misconception is assuming a "puzzle-like" integration, where all pieces perfectly fit and match. This static conception fails to capture the dynamism and inherent ambiguities of the various images and precludes interpretive possibilities. The second misconception is simply replacing potentially problematic images wholesale with alternatives, which risks perpetuating a problematic "pendulum swing." This reveals a recurring pattern of reactive thinking, common in church practice, where leaders define their leadership in opposition to a perceived "other." While reactive stances can catalyze innovation, they also risk an endless "pendulum swing" between generations. In contrast to these misconceptions, a Christo-ecclesial vision discerns the potential and limitations of each image through the central image of Christ, dynamically transforming them within the collective life of the church. This suggests that theological reflection must engage with the power of these images, recognizing their potential for both good and ill, and seeking to understand how they can be harnessed to foster a more authentic and life-giving vision of church and leadership.

Furthermore, the image of Christ emphasizes the personal, human dimension of the church community and its leadership. Some images, even biblical ones, can be

dehumanizing. Not only non-human images like "sheep," but also "servant" or "soldier," can, through their emphasis on specific roles, obscure a holistic view of personhood. Christ, as the fully human person, and the church as the "collective person," highlight this essential personal aspect, crucial for interpreting and applying any image.

Finally, this Christocentric transformation acknowledges the power and "stickiness" of the lived metaphors. The study underscores the profound influence of metaphorical language, such as "Home" and "Soldiers of Christ," on leadership at GMBC. These images, though not explicit leadership models, powerfully shape expectations and behaviors within the community. The data demonstrates their persistence, highlighting the difficulty of intentional alteration. Crucially, the Bible plays a significant role in this interplay, serving as both a source of legitimacy and a foundational text. Therefore, transforming these images through Christ necessitates a transformed, Christ-centered reading of the Bible, enabling deeper engagement with the underlying realities of these images and facilitating genuine transformation.

7.4 Transforming "Home": The Collective Person and the Diaspora Church

Having explored Bonhoeffer's theological framework and its contemporary relevance, this section will apply his theological insights to the lived theology of GMBC, specifically examining the metaphorical images employed by lay leaders, their biblical basis, and the potential for theological reflection and transformation. GMBC, like many diaspora churches, grapples with questions of belonging and identity. While the initial image of "Home" offered comfort, it proved inadequate for navigating the complexities of relocation, generational change, and evolving community needs. Similarly, the "drifter" narrative, while acknowledging displacement, risked reinforcing rootlessness. This section explores how Bonhoeffer's concept of the "collective person," integrated with "Christ existing as community," offers a powerful corrective. This framework addresses fragmentation by fostering a deeper sense of belonging rooted in Christ, transforming both the "Home" and "drifter" narratives. It also provides a theological framework for navigating the tensions between individual and collective identities, fostering mutual enrichment and a more robust understanding of

the church's mission. Finally, this section explores the implications of this transformed image for intergenerational dynamics within GMBC, offering a vision of shared leadership and collective growth.

In the following subsections, I will examine how Bonhoeffer's concept of the "collective person" serves as a reparative image, addressing belongingness and identity; the necessary balance of "closedness" and "openness" within the collective person, fostering internal strength while embracing the outward mission; and the transcendence of individual/collective dichotomies through mutual enrichment within the "collective person." Finally, building on these insights, I will introduce the image of "Christ as a drifter" to counter the narrative of "taking roots," offering a new perspective on the church's identity in a world of change and displacement.

7.4.1 Belonging and Identity in Christ: The "Collective Person" as a Reparative Image

As discussed in previous chapters, GMBC has wrestled with issues of belonging and identity, particularly in light of its unique context as a church for Mandarin-speaking "Hong Kong drifters." The initial image of "Home" offered a sense of comfort and stability but ultimately proved inadequate for navigating the complexities of relocation, generational change, and the evolving needs of the community. Furthermore, the "drifter" narrative itself, while acknowledging the challenges of displacement, can reinforce a sense of rootlessness and isolation. This section proposes that Bonhoeffer's concept of the "collective person," when integrated with the core image of "Christ existing as community," offers a powerful corrective, addressing the fragmentation and fostering a deeper sense of belonging rooted in shared life.

Bonhoeffer's insights concerning the concept of collective person provide a deeper understanding of the uniquely persistent "Home" or "family" image in Chinese, particularly diasporic, churches. This deep-rootedness reflects the church as a distinct collective person of "community" (*Gemeinschaft*), rooted in the "will to meaning," providing a profound sense of belonging and collective identity affirmation.

Conversely, in "society" (*Gesellschaft*), characterized by a "rational purposive will," the collective person is less central.⁵⁸⁵ This is evident in GMBC's development: the yearning for belonging and identity, embodied in the family image, initially formed and strengthened GMBC by gathering Christian families. However, when leaders, responding to the crisis, attempted to transform it into a gospel-focused "military camp," this "rational purposive will" proved less cohesive than images of family and home.

However, a general understanding of the collective person, particularly from Scheler's perspective, also reveals this image's own fragility. The collective person's sense of belonging and identity is deeply tied to shared values and feelings.⁵⁸⁶ Yet, within the immigrant church context, this identity is far from homogenous. Instead, it comprises multiple, provisional "adhesive identities," with values susceptible to environmental and generational shifts. When significant value differences emerge, especially when empathy is lacking, the shared sense of collective personhood becomes vulnerable to conflict and even disintegration. This is readily observable in both North American Chinese churches and GMBC's specific trajectory.

Consequently, transforming this community's image, while challenging, presents a clear opportunity for growth. Crucially, it does not necessitate abandoning the "home" image, but rather reimagining it through the lens of "collective person in Christ." This involves recognizing and moving beyond the limitations of constructing belonging and identity based on place and language. The initial appeal of "Home" for GMBC stemmed from its association with stability, familiarity, and emotional connection. However, as the community evolved, a place-based understanding of "Home" proved limiting. The physical church building could not fully encompass the community's dynamic life. Furthermore, while initially unifying, defining "Home" primarily through shared language could create boundaries and exclude non-Mandarin speakers. Reframing "Home" as "collective person" shifts the emphasis from physical location and shared language to shared life in Christ. This transformed "collective person" unites members through their shared identity in Christ. This

⁵⁸⁵ It signifies a will directed towards a specific goal, utilizing social structures instrumentally. This distinctly contrasts with "reciprocal will.". See SC, 88-89.

⁵⁸⁶ See 7.2.3 for the discussion of the Schelerian "vicarious feeling".

reframing fosters a more inclusive and expansive understanding of belonging, accommodating diversity and embracing change.

More broadly, this offers a general and direct implication for Chinese churches in various contexts. Church leaders, both ordained and lay, can intentionally yet carefully cultivate collective personhood by grounding belonging and identity in Christ. Utilizing the family image is not problematic; even national, ethnic, and cultural identities can serve as *ad hoc* instruments. Even a degree of tension and diversity need not fracture collective identity, provided there is ongoing, vigilant reflection and renewal through the lens of Christ.

7.4.2 Embracing the World: The "Collective Person" and its Mission

Bonhoeffer's theological anthropology, particularly his concepts of "closedness" and "openness," further illuminates the image of the collective. Addressing the fallen "collective person" of sinners, Bonhoeffer argues that sin disrupts the balance between individual and collective, resulting in the "utter solitude" and "isolation" characteristic of fallen humanity.⁵⁸⁷ The individual's "closedness" becomes dominant, hindering genuine connection and reciprocity. However, this isolation does not completely sever human connection; even in sin, individuals remain part of a broken and distorted community. However, Christ's redemption does not eliminate closedness in favor of complete openness, but rather restores the balance between them. This restored balance allows for an analogous relationship between the individual person and the collective person, maintaining the uniqueness of individual identity without creating an absolute barrier to the wider community. Or, as Scheler suggests, both the individual person and the collective person can coexist within the same person.⁵⁸⁸

This multi-layered coexistence of closedness and openness within the collective personhood is crucial, addressing Ray Anderson's kenotic and ecstatic

⁵⁸⁷ SC, 108, 145.

⁵⁸⁸ As Scheler correctly argues, "[a]n individual person and a collective person 'belong' to every finite person ... one is not the 'foundation' of the other. The collective or group person is not composed of individual persons in the sense that it derives its existence from such a composition; nor is the collective person a result of the merely reciprocal agency of individual persons ...", Scheler, *Formalism*, 522.

ecclesiological dimensions. However, embodying these dimensions at the interpersonal, or more specifically, relational level, offers a more concrete and practical way to understand and embody the church's mission. For Bonhoeffer, "closedness" within the Christian community is not exclusionary or a retreat from the world, but rather an intentional turning towards one another in Christ. This "closed" space fosters vulnerability, confession, and forgiveness, cultivating the spiritual strength and unity necessary for engaging the outside world and experiencing the transformative power of the community of saints.⁵⁸⁹ Within this intentional inward focus, authentic disclosure and confession are fostered,⁵⁹⁰ sins are forgiven,⁵⁹¹ and mutual burdens are shared.⁵⁹²

Bonhoeffer's two interrelated dimensions of the collective personhood—"being-with-each-other" and "being-for-each-other"—resonate intriguingly with Vincent Shen's concept of "mutual enrichment" discussed in section 4.3.2. A key parallel lies in the emphasis on reciprocity and other-centeredness. Shen's articulation of "dynamic reciprocity" and "other-oriented reciprocity," rooted in the Confucian concepts of Jen and shu, echoes Bonhoeffer's understanding of Christian love as a self-giving act within the *sanctorum communio*.⁵⁹³ Both thinkers emphasize moving beyond self-centeredness and actively seeking the good of the other. This resonates with Bonhoeffer's discussion of "being-for," where the individual's life finds meaning in service to the community and ultimately to God. Both thinkers advocate for a relational approach that transcends self-interest and prioritizes the well-being of the whole.

A further point of resonance lies in Shen's concept of "mutual strangification." The act of "strangifying" one's own cultural values and beliefs through engagement with the "Other" requires a willingness to embrace difference and be transformed by the encounter. This resonates with Bonhoeffer's understanding of the church's openness

⁵⁸⁹ SC, 175.

⁵⁹⁰ SC, 176.

⁵⁹¹ SC, 176.

⁵⁹² SC, 180.

⁵⁹³ SC, 168, "(Christian Love is) a matter of rational reflection as well as human empathy. The purpose of love is exclusively determined by God's will for the other person, namely, to subject the other to God's rule."

to the world, grounded in the relational reality of "Christ existing as church-community." Moreover, Shen's emphasis on "mutual strangification" as a prerequisite for "mutual enrichment"—a paradoxical respect for difference and reflexivity that enables "other-oriented reciprocity"—is comparable to Bonhoeffer's notion of the "plurality of spirit,"⁵⁹⁴ which acknowledges rather than dismisses difference. For the church community, this acknowledgment is not meant to assert its own superiority, but rather to foster deeper understanding within relationships, predicated on being-with and being-for others. The Incarnation of Christ imbues this community with a distinctive character in its encounters with the other, precluding the erection of self-protective barriers.

Despite the differing presuppositions of these two thinkers, the resonance between their ideas is significantly impactful for diasporic Chinese Christian communities. It offers a framework for ethical compatibility, and even congruence, between Christianity and Confucianism at the level of praxis, proving more open and flexible than the ad hoc assimilation of specific values. Moreover, it provides a pathway for cultural redescription, enabling the church to engage deeply within the diasporic Chinese cultural context and contribute to the cultural renewal of the Chinese community itself.

7.4.3 Relationality in Christ: Transcending Individualism and Collectivism

Furthermore, navigating the relationship between the individual and the collective is not merely a philosophical problem of "one and many," but a practical challenge for every leader, particularly within specific cultural contexts. As S. K. Tang suggests, building on the transformative power of "Christ existing as community," Bonhoeffer's perspective is particularly effective in challenging both Western and Eastern forms of extreme individualism and collectivism.⁵⁹⁵ Bonhoeffer argues that Christ's redemptive action dismantles the isolating and self-centered nature of the fallen world.⁵⁹⁶ By entering into the relationship with humanity, Christ prioritizes the other and offers a path toward genuine connection, transcending the threat of collective absorption or

⁵⁹⁴ SC, 193.

⁵⁹⁵ Andres S.K. Tang, "On Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*: A Theology of Sociality of Individual and Community," *Logos & Pneuma* 8 (January 1998): 227–51.

⁵⁹⁶ Tang, "On Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*," 250. See SC, 145.

atomistic isolation through self-giving love. This reframes the "other" through Christ, transforming them from a threat to be assimilated or avoided into a gift from God and an object of love.⁵⁹⁷

Crucially, this mutual enrichment is not merely a reciprocal exchange of benefits, but a reflection of Christ's love shaping interpersonal relationships within the collective personhood.⁵⁹⁸ In this context, vicarious representation is not about claiming authority over others or perfectly embodying Christ, but rather acting for others out of love and in response to their needs, reflecting Christ's self-giving love. Imposing preconceived notions upon others does not constitute vicarious action. Therefore, while individuals cannot perfectly represent Christ, their actions within the community can manifest Christ-like qualities, thereby making the reality of "Christ existing as church-community" tangibly perceptible.⁵⁹⁹

Tang notes that Bonhoeffer's later works more fully develop this Christocentric understanding of genuine community,⁶⁰⁰ nevertheless, *Sanctorum Communio* already offers two insights for the theological image of family within Chinese ecclesial communities. For Bonhoeffer, many groups, including families and even sects, may exhibit characteristics of a collective person.⁶⁰¹ However, he emphasizes living, reciprocal relationships within these groups, rather than a specific structure.⁶⁰² In other words, if the family image becomes a rigid hierarchy where members merely fulfill prescribed roles instead of existing in genuine relationships of being-with and being-for others, its usefulness in representing the church as "Christ existing as community" diminishes considerably.

Second, Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology allows for dynamic adaptation. Even as existing communal forms dissolve—such as the traditional Confucian family structure

⁵⁹⁷ SC, 167-68.

⁵⁹⁸ SC, 172-76.

⁵⁹⁹ SC, 178-80.

⁶⁰⁰ Tang, "On Dietrich Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*," 251.

⁶⁰¹ Bonhoeffer argues that the sociological distinction between church and sect is ultimately inadequate, as both can be manifestations of the *sanctorum communio* depending on their relationship to the Word. See SC, 267-68.

⁶⁰² Note that Bonhoeffer critiques both the voluntary association and compulsory organization models of the church, and his rationale also applies to the differentiation of other groups. See SC, 253-57.

gradually disappearing amidst societal evolution—the church can remain anchored by understanding community through the lens of the collective person in Christ. Given Bonhoeffer's assertion that the church is both "completed in Christ" and simultaneously "being built" within time, the discovery of new culturally relevant and Christ-centered expressions of its communal identity is to be expected.⁶⁰³

Conversely, even as existing communal forms dissolve—such as the traditional Confucian family structure gradually disappearing amidst societal evolution—the church can remain anchored by understanding community through the lens of the collective person in Christ, thereby discovering new culturally relevant and Christ-centered expressions of its communal identity.

While such discoveries of new images should emerge organically within the church community, the following section offers a preliminary exploration based on ethnographic data.

7.4.4 "Christ as a Drifter": Embracing the Diaspora Experience

An intriguing possibility emerges from the seemingly disparate narratives of two generations of elders at GMBC and some initially opaque images. In the ethnographic accounts, the "Body of Christ" image offers a starting point. Elias* uses "Body of Christ" to challenge denominational tradition, while Vasilios* employs it to argue against appointing external pastors, advocating instead for leaders arising from within the congregation to "grow together" within the "Body of Christ."⁶⁰⁴

Although they offer limited further theological interpretation, it is evident that participating in Christ transcends all other factors—linguistic, ethnic, professional or denominational identities. This conviction underpins their leadership within the church, which is also implicitly in line with the Bonhoefferian collective person.

Consider also second-generation leader Nasos*'s poignant image of a "ship adrift." This resonates with the contemporary experience of "Hong Kong drifters" and subtly departs from the earlier "rootless duckweed" metaphor. As a leader, Nasos* cannot

⁶⁰³ SC, 153-54.

⁶⁰⁴ Vasilios*'s usage seemingly evokes the "organic" metaphor that Bonhoeffer explicitly rejects. See SC, 138.

abandon ship, but must navigate the uncertain waters alongside fellow leaders and the church community, sharing their experiences, "rain or shine," to borrow Vasilios*'s phrase. Though still adrift, a sense of collective identity emerges.

Combining these threads—the collective person of "Christ existing in community" and the image of the "ship adrift"—yields a possible new image: *Christ as a drifter*. This image has two interconnected dimensions:

First, Christ's earthly life is a model of drifting. The Gospels portray Jesus as an itinerant preacher, constantly on the move, mirroring the fluidity of contemporary diasporic experiences. He relied on hospitality (Luke 10:38-42), crossed social boundaries, engaging with marginalized communities like the Samaritans (John 4), and even experienced homelessness (Matthew 8:20). This earthly experience, a life lived in between places and among the marginalized, prefigures the church's own diasporic journey. Jesus, in submitting to the law, entered into the ultimate solitude of the cross, a solitude that paradoxically creates the specifically Christian community of the cross.⁶⁰⁵ His "drifting" was not aimless wandering, but a purposeful movement driven by his mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God, a kingdom both present and yet to come.⁶⁰⁶ Just as Christ's life reveals the transformation of humanity-in-Adam to humanity-in-Christ, so too the church's history is a journey of transformation.⁶⁰⁷

Second, Christ exists as, and drifts with, the church-community. When the church experiences displacement, Christ drifts *with* them, sharing the precariousness and uncertainty of their journey. This is not simply an analogy, but a theological statement about the nature of Christ's presence, a presence realized by the Holy Spirit and experienced within the community.⁶⁰⁸ Christ accompanies the church, offering solidarity and hope amid uncertainty. He bears their burdens and calls them to bear one another's burdens through his love.⁶⁰⁹

⁶⁰⁵ SC, 150-151, where Bonhoeffer describes Jesus as "[s]erving the law leads Jesus to the cross... And this is the specifically Christian church community."

⁶⁰⁶ SC, 142.

⁶⁰⁷ SC, 147, "Christ's history is marked by the fact that in it humanity-in-Adam is transformed into humanity-in-Christ."

⁶⁰⁸ SC, 153.

⁶⁰⁹ SC, 176.

Building on Lakoff and Johnson's theory, "Christ as a drifter" can be a constructive image for diasporic church communities. It connects the contemporary experience of "drifting" with Jesus's own life and the early church's journey. This image transcends the limitations of static rootedness, offering a dynamic understanding of belonging and identity.⁶¹⁰ It affirms that the church's identity is not tied to a particular place, but to its relationship with the drifting Christ, who journeys with them through the uncertainties of history, guiding them toward the promised Kingdom, a kingdom known and experienced within the community of faith. Just as Christ's historicity is inseparable from his word, so too the church's drifting must be understood in light of the word that both creates and sustains it, a word preached and heard within the gathered community.⁶¹¹

This transformed understanding of the church community now calls for a corresponding transformation of leadership, moving beyond static hierarchies toward a more dynamic and responsive model.

7.5 Transforming "Soldiers": A Bonhoefferian Vision for Ecclesial Leadership

GMBC's leadership is at a critical juncture, grappling with the tension between its espoused collective model and the ingrained "Soldiers of Christ" image. While the first generation effectively leveraged "traits" like discipline and an implicit "paternalistic" style, the second generation struggles with the "soldier" ideal, experiencing burnout and inefficiency within a truly "shared leadership" structure. Applying organizational and missiological theories reveals the need to move beyond simplistic metaphors and engage with cultural nuances. Lynch's "friendship" model offers a promising alternative, emphasizing vulnerability and relationality, but requires further contextualization and integration with existing values. Ultimately, GMBC needs a more nuanced theology of leadership that balances individual

⁶¹⁰ Lakoff and Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, 265. The authors indicate that a key impact of the metaphor analysis is the emergence of new understandings through the combination of metaphors into more complex ones.

⁶¹¹ SC, 147.

strengths with collective responsibility, embraces vulnerability, and addresses the practical challenges of shared decision-making within its specific cultural context.

The following subsections will unfold a Bonhoefferian vision for leadership at GMBC. First, we will establish the theological context of collective leadership, drawing on Bonhoeffer's concept of "Christ existing as community." This foundation will then inform our exploration of the theological "position" of leaders within a nested structure of collective personhood and vicarious representation. Having established this framework, we will then examine how it transforms existing leadership models—trait-based, paternalistic, and shared leadership—through a Bonhoefferian lens. Finally, we will explore how this transformed perspective fosters intergenerational connection and shared leadership, moving beyond the limiting images of "soldiers" and "sheep" towards a more integrated and dynamic understanding of leadership within the church.

7.5.1 Collective Leadership: Grounded in "Christ Existing as Community"

Reconciling seemingly contradictory leadership images requires acknowledging the theological reality of the church and its leadership team as a "*peccatorum communio*" inhabiting a fragmented world broken by sin, rather than an idealized one. Given this reality, there are no omnipotent heroes or perfect fathers. Even leaders espousing servant leadership may harbor private failings; pure, selfless friendships are not guaranteed. Furthermore, the temptation of power is deeply ingrained in human nature, making it impossible to prevent its abuse through perfect or all-encompassing rules. The brokenness of the world, societal pressures, and the inevitable limitations imposed by individual histories and circumstances further complicate communication and understanding, creating tensions and difficulties for individuals and teams undertaking leadership roles.

Paradoxically, acknowledging the inadequacy of secular leadership models within a broken reality creates new possibilities within the redefined community of "Christ existing as community." Embracing this community of both "saints" and "sinners" resists idealized abstractions and acknowledges the complexities of human brokenness and communal struggles. By rejecting unrealistic expectations and heroic ideals that can lead to burnout and disillusionment, this inherent recognition of

human limitations fosters a compassionate and understanding approach to leadership. This shared recognition of the church as a *communio peccatorum*, a community of sinners, calibrates mutual expectations, mitigating the pressures of unrealistic ideals, and fostering a church environment that embraces human vulnerability, encourages authenticity, and promotes open communication.

Moreover, Bonhoeffer's concept of vicarious representation resists the objectification of individuals, both congregants and leaders, as abstract entities or functional roles. Within this dynamic, Christ's distinct calling empowers leaders, embodying Christ's self-giving love and compelling them to "be Christ" to one another. This framework fosters empathy, mutual care, and shared responsibility, replacing instrumentalization and performance metrics with genuine relationships and the lived experience of community. In this sense, leadership is not a privilege within the community, but a form of "vicarious action," reflecting Christ's ultimate vicarious representation through service to the community.

Bonhoeffer's Christocentric approach not only addresses relational richness in leadership but also offers profound insights into a theological foundation for church leadership. A dialogue with Lynch, considering her theological construction of friendship, serves as an illustrative example. Broadly, Bonhoeffer's depiction of ecclesial relationships aligns with Lynch's emphasis on genuine relationships as the foundation of leadership. Specifically, Christ's presence renewing the community through members' vicarious action resonates with Lynch's focus on mutual support and shared responsibility within leadership. Furthermore, the concept of vicarious representation, acting for one another, echoes Lynch's emphasis on internal support and shared responsibility within leadership. Even the notion of friendship, implying an atmosphere of kindness, listening, and open communication conducive to discernment, finds parallels with Bonhoeffer's awareness of the objective spirit.

However, Bonhoeffer's engagements with the concept of "friend" or "friendship" reveal deeper theological considerations. Firstly, his profound awareness of humanity's sinfulness and the fragmented nature of human communities prevents an overly idealized view of friendship. For instance, he explicitly distinguishes human acts of sacrifice, such as "heroic love" for one's country or friend, from Christ's self-

sacrifice.⁶¹² Christ's vicarious action transcends mere ethical action, such as giving one's life for one's friends. In another case, he contrasts "friendship" with "community with God for us," which exists solely in faith, highlighting the unique nature of ecclesial relationships within the collective person of Christ.⁶¹³ Finally, Bonhoeffer emphasizes that intercession in Christ transcends personal connection or empathy, remaining unbound by familiarity.⁶¹⁴ He argues that true intercession stems not from our ability to empathize with another's suffering, but from our recognition of our shared culpability in sin and our shared participation in Christ's redemptive work. These observations do not diminish the potential of friendship as a leadership image, but rather deepen its Christological significance and address potential pitfalls. Specifically, they caution against allowing personal affections within friendships to supersede accountability to the wider community.⁶¹⁵

7.5.2 Leaders within the Community: Nested Personhood and the Dynamics of Vicarious Representation

Building upon the interaction between Bonhoeffer's Christo-ecclesial vision and existing church leadership models, this subsection explores the construction of a viable theological image for church leaders, grounded in Bonhoeffer's concepts, clarifying their ecclesial role and empowering them to fulfill their mission. This constructive endeavor is prompted by a real "subject-object tension" within GMBC, potentially applicable to other Chinese churches. A subtle shift occurs between the two generations of leadership and the congregation. First-generation leaders tend to view the congregation as recipients of their service, while second-generation leaders, having emerged from within the congregation, identify more closely with them. This distinction, evident in the first generation's expectation that the second generation become "examples" and the second generation's reverence for the first,

⁶¹² SC 156n17.

⁶¹³ SC 178.

⁶¹⁴ Bonhoeffer illustrates this point by contrasting prayer for a close friend with prayer for an "unknown sailor." He argues that the sins of this stranger afflict him no less than those of someone he knows intimately, because the affliction arises not from personal empathy but from recognizing his own complicity in the sins of the world and his responsibility for Christ's death. See SC 186-87.

⁶¹⁵ For a deeper understanding of Bonhoeffer's treatment of friendship in *Sanctorum Communio* and other works, see Preston D. S. Parsons, *Spiritual Friendship: Bonhoeffer's Practice of Intercession, Confession, and Self-Offering* (Cambridge: Grove Books Limited, 2021).

gradually shifts the leadership team's positioning of the congregation from object to subject. This signifies a developing reciprocity within a collective "we," which, nevertheless, remains subject to power struggles, conflicts, and human vulnerability. This dynamic necessitates a theological framework that accounts for both the distinct roles of leaders and their integral belonging within the community, not to eliminate these struggles, but to help leaders define their positions and clarify their responsibilities.

Bonhoeffer's concept of the "collective person" provides such a framework, illuminating the nested circles of community within the church:

- **Individual Leader:** Each leader is a distinct individual, yet also part of the collective person of the leadership team.
- **Leadership Team:** The leadership team is a collective person itself, existing within the larger collective person of the church community.
- **Church Community:** The church community is a collective person that exists within the collective person of the world.

This nested structure emphasizes both the distinct identity and interconnectedness of each level. Each circle possesses both "closedness," necessary for maintaining its integrity and fostering deep relationships, and "openness," allowing for connection and service to the larger community. Crucially, Christ's presence is not limited to individuals but extends to each collective person, making each level a potential site of redemptive action. This framework offers a broader perspective than models that focus solely on intra-leadership dynamics, recognizing the interconnectedness of different levels of community. The defining characteristic of collective personhood is not a hierarchical stratification, but rather the understanding that each individual bears varying degrees of collective personhood. This structure highlights that the leadership team cannot function merely as an operational committee, but must be deeply connected in Christ.

Bonhoeffer's concept of vicarious representation, rooted in Christ's act on the cross, illuminates leadership dynamics. While Bonhoeffer primarily focuses on Christ's vicarious action for humanity, the inherent mutuality within the concept, as applied to the Christian community, suggests a reciprocal dynamic: leaders act for one another

and the community, recognizing their own need to be acted for in Christ. This reciprocity, grounded in the shared life of the church, mitigates power imbalances and fosters interdependence. Furthermore, vicarious action is not self-serving but focuses on serving the larger church community and the world. Leaders embody Christ's redemptive action by empowering others to participate in God's work. This outward focus counteracts the potential for leadership to become driven by personal ambition. This framework also provides leaders with a lens for perceiving the congregation and the world, particularly marginalized members, fostering attentiveness to power dynamics and encouraging efforts to dismantle oppressive structures.

The concept of "objective spirit" further enriches this understanding. Each level of community develops its own unique "objective spirit," encompassing shared values, practices, and traditions. The Holy Spirit shapes these "objective spirits," mediating Christ's presence within the community. For the leadership team, this means cultivating a shared ethos of service, humility, and mutual accountability, unique to them yet connected to both individuals and the church as a whole. This shared "objective spirit" informs their vicarious actions, ensuring their leadership is driven by a desire to serve Christ. This dynamic allows the leadership team to maintain its integrity while remaining responsive to the world's needs. By attending to the "objective spirit" at each level, the church can foster a more holistic and integrated approach to leadership, reflecting Christ's transformative presence.

7.5.3 Transforming Leadership: Redescribing the Leadership Models

Recalling Chapter 5, I explored some correlational connections between GMBC data and contemporary organizational leadership models, yielding intriguing insights that nevertheless require further theological reflection. Bonhoeffer's theology, grounded in the concept of "Christ existing as community," offers a promising avenue for reevaluating and revitalizing these models. This involves not only assessing their theological potential but also deriving practical applications and addressing unresolved issues. Following the previous structure, the following sections will "redescribe" trait, paternalistic, and collective/shared leadership models through the Christological lens provided by *Sanctorum Communio*.

Redescribing The Traits Model

The "traits model" of leadership, often emphasizing individual characteristics, can be reinterpreted through the lens of *Sanctorum Communio*. Given the premise that "the reality of sin and the *communio peccatorum* remain even in God's church-community," Bonhoeffer's perspective fundamentally denies the possibility of an ideal church leader as possessing a pre-existing set of personal traits, or the metaphor of "a great man."⁶¹⁶ However, it is important to note that this does not imply discarding valuable traits themselves. Rather, Bonhoeffer's perspective facilitates their integration within a framework of shared life as constitutive elements of the church.⁶¹⁷ This shifts the focus from individual qualities to the cultivation of a "collective person"—that is, communal practices and relational dynamics shaped by Christ's presence. Within this framework, the understanding of these traits must be aligned with the Christological center, or, as Bonhoeffer states quoting the Pauline verses, "put on the Lord Jesus Christ."⁶¹⁸ With this refocusing, such virtues will not, as in the GMBC case, become a source of pressure for the second generation due to their perceived unattainability.

Similarly, shifting the focus from individual traits to collective personhood does not negate the value of "example," but rather emphasizes how individuals, as members of the body of Christ, embody Christ's example within and for the community. Practically, I would argue that this shift in focus emphasizes that traits should not attract the congregation to a leader's charisma, but rather manifest in service. In Bonhoeffer's terms, this translates into the "three great, positive possibilities of acting for each other in the community of saints," namely "self-renouncing, active work for the neighbor; intercessory prayer; and, finally, the mutual forgiveness of sins in God's name."⁶¹⁹ Through such actions, leaders follow Christ's example, not to establish themselves, but to direct others toward Christ, embodying the self-giving

⁶¹⁶ SC, 123.

⁶¹⁷ As Bonhoeffer emphasizes, "the necessary bond between the basic-relations and the empirical form of community, understood as a unique structure, constitutes the essence of the church." SC, 125.

⁶¹⁸ See SC, 140. Cf. Col. 3:10; Eph. 4:24; Rom. 13:14; Gal. 3:27.

⁶¹⁹ SC, 184.

love and service that characterize his life.⁶²⁰

Redescribing The Paternalistic Model

The preceding analysis demonstrated a strong correlation between the paternalistic model, prevalent in Chinese churches, and the image of church as "home" or "family." This model draws upon the Confucian family structure, often defaulting to a singular, typically male, patriarchal figure within a top-down, unidirectional power structure emphasizing strong supervision, personal integrity, and benevolence. Deeply embedded within the cultural context, this model exerts a profound influence, even operating implicitly within congregations like GMBC that explicitly reject such a structure. Theologically identifying the problematic aspects of this model is relatively straightforward; however, transforming and reshaping it from a theological perspective and applying it beneficially to church practice is more challenging.

Given the complexity, Bonhoeffer's theological perspectives still offer helpful insights for reflection and renewal. One key concept is "objective spirit," characterized as a developing "part of history," "fallible and imperfect" in its understanding and will.⁶²¹ It is not a composite of the "individual spirits" within the community, but is nevertheless influenced by participants who have both "creative and hindering roles."⁶²² The GMBC case exemplifies this: the presence of the "hidden" paternalistic among the first-generation leaders, and the subsequent chaos following the intergenerational transition and this role's disappearance—particularly given the participants' limited awareness of these significant personal influences—reflects, to some extent, the dynamic interplay between individual spirits and the team's objective spirit.

Here, an aspect of Bonhoeffer's "objective spirit" helps illuminate a blind spot in church leadership: "history"—both that of the community and the leadership team. This historical consciousness is characteristic of the church as "community" rather than "society".⁶²³ GMBC's leaders, as revealed by the interview data, prioritized

⁶²⁰ SC, 179. "Christians can and ought to act like Christ; they ought to bear the burdens and sufferings of the neighbor."

⁶²¹ SC, 214-15.

⁶²² SC, 215.

⁶²³ SC, 260.

establishing systems rather than addressing history, a gap not addressed by many leadership theories emphasizing cultural sensitivity and social context. Discussions seeking ideal relational images—whether a paternalistic figure or a "public intellectual"⁶²⁴—must consider the appropriateness of these images within the group's specific history and characteristics, rather than solely focusing on their functional or even theological merits.

That said, Bonhoeffer's perspectives in *Sanctorum Communio* offer valuable critical reflections on the Chinese paternalistic leadership model. First, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on Christ as the church's sole head naturally precludes any single church leader holding absolute authority.⁶²⁵ However, for selfless leaders motivated by paternalistic care for the community, such care, when expressed as bearing the congregation's burdens, can align with Bonhoeffer's concept of sacrificial love for others, thereby "acting like Christ."⁶²⁶ Nevertheless, grounded in the concept of "being-with-one-another" within the church community, Bonhoeffer emphasizes the reciprocal nature of vicarious representation, implying mutual burden-bearing. Members not only act vicariously for others but also receive such action in return. Beyond simply a difficult responsibility, Bonhoeffer particularly praised Luther's understanding of this mutual vicarious action, describing it "with incomparable beauty" as a shared commitment to one another, in life and death.⁶²⁷ This poses a deeper challenge to some paternalistic leadership, which overemphasizes the one-way giving of the leader, as exemplified by the first-generation leaders of GMBC who emphasized their role as "givers" (3.1.4) while resisting receiving help. It is also crucial to note that this reciprocal responsibility stems from Christ's vicarious representation, not from fulfilling specific values (i.e., integrity or benevolence) or role expectations (i.e., that of a father) according to Bonhoeffer.

Having discussed the potential applicability and modifications of the paternalistic leadership model, a crucial, albeit not entirely speculative, question remains: How might Chinese churches and their leaders adapt if Confucian familial values further

⁶²⁴ Chow, "Chinese Public Theology," 150-51.

⁶²⁵ SC, 236.

⁶²⁶ SC, 179.

⁶²⁷ SC, 180.

erode with cultural shifts? Bonhoeffer's theology becomes significant here—rather than offering a concrete solution or an alternative theological image, it highlights the fundamental reality that the church as a collective person hinges on its relationship to Christ and the Holy Spirit, mediated through the Word as a shared, divinely grounded reality.⁶²⁸ Thus, church community leaders should find assurance and comfort in the fact that the church's existence does not depend on a specific model or image. The church is, and will continue to be, the church—not a human construct, but a reality grounded in "Christ existing as community." However, as Bonhoeffer reminds us, precisely because of this reality, the church possesses a genuine history intertwined with world history.⁶²⁹ This implies that a Christocentric, incarnational interpretation, negotiation, and enactment of the church within the ever-evolving knowledge, culture, and perspectives of the world constitutes an ongoing task for the church community, including its leaders. It means we can and should discern the various factors of their context, including language, cultural traditions, and metaphors derived from lived experience, engaging in active and reflexive dialogue with them, and utilizing them effectively in the church's teaching and practice. However, we must remain mindful of the imperfect and contingent—or, in Bonhoeffer's terms, "penultimate"—nature of these factors, employing them to express the ultimate word when appropriate, and also, when necessary (such as during intergenerational cultural shifts), letting go and embracing changes. This applies to the paternalistic image in Chinese churches, as well as to all future images arising within the lived life of church communities.

Redescribing the Collective/Shared Leadership Model

While Bonhoeffer's emphasis on community and relationships, particularly the concept of the "collective person," appears relevant to the collective or shared leadership models, it should not be simply invoked to endorse a specific operational structure or even a particular type of relationship (such as friendship). Rather, it offers a more holistic perspective for understanding the limitations and potential

⁶²⁸ SC, 141, 153, 189.

⁶²⁹ SC, 211. Bonhoeffer's precise wording is, "The history of the church is the hidden center of world history."

improvements of such leadership models within ecclesial practice.

The first crucial consideration is the relationship between a team's objective spirit and Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the "plurality of spirit," which highlights the individual's solitary standing before God.⁶³⁰ While this distinction safeguards against the potential danger of the collective absorbing the individual, its significance for Bonhoeffer extends further. "Plurality of spirit" reminds church leaders that their roles are not simply about representing the collective; they must exercise their responsibilities with an awareness of their individual accountability before God. As he states: "The word is social in character, not only in its origin but also in its aim. Tying the Spirit to the word means that the Spirit aims at *a plurality of hearers* and establishes a visible sign by which the actualization is to take place."⁶³¹

A crucial reminder from Bonhoeffer is that a team's objective spirit is not equivalent to the Holy Spirit. This is particularly relevant given the prior analysis indicating that GMBC's first-generation leaders heavily emphasized consensus as a practice of shared spiritual unity. While consensus is important, it is not the sole objective of discernment. A crucial aspect of leadership teams lies precisely in their function as plural hearers, attentively listening both to God through the Word of God and to one another. The emphasis on plurality is not driven by institutional, effectiveness, or even relational considerations, but rather by the understanding that the team functions as a "community of spirit" grounded in the shared experience of God's love revealed in Christ.⁶³²

This perspective illuminates some of the previously analyzed challenges, such as the tension between limiting power (as noted by the GMBC elders), which can lead to decreased autonomy and ineffectiveness, and the simultaneous call to empower lay persons within the church. At a deeper level, this tension reflects the dilemma between acknowledging the darker aspects of human nature and the allure of power, and fostering healthy, trusting relationships. Bonhoeffer, however, offers a more radical critique. He argues that "Christian love," fundamentally, "is not a human

⁶³⁰ SC, 161-65.

⁶³¹ SC, 158, italics added.

⁶³² SC, 165-67.

possibility."⁶³³ Yet, he also offers a profound hope: "It is possible only through faith in Christ and through the work of the Holy Spirit."⁶³⁴ Indeed, for a leadership team composed of sinners, attributing relational breakdowns solely to insufficient skills, inadequate abilities, or the absence of a perfect leadership model is less helpful than accepting the realities of human nature and relationships. While gratitude for positive teamwork experiences is warranted, striving to institutionalize or normalize such experiences can be counterproductive. Instead, the challenge lies in learning to love and collaborate amidst the tensions and frictions of reality, recognizing, as Bonhoeffer does, that love, as a "volitional act," is "purposeful."⁶³⁵ Thus, both the rotational system practiced by GMBC and advocated by Lynch should continue, albeit grounded in a more robust theological foundation of bearing one another's burdens in Christ, a concept encapsulated by "being-for-each-other."⁶³⁶

A practical challenge still remains: the increased communication costs and potentially diminished enjoyment associated with shared leadership (5.1.3). It is important to note that Bonhoeffer's theological discourse on love in *Sanctorum Communio* prioritizes responsibility over emotional gratification and does not rely on positive feelings as motivation. As he states regarding love for neighbor, it is given "not because it would derive pleasure from that person's individuality, but because the neighbor as a human being calls on me as the other who experiences God's claim in this You of the neighbor."⁶³⁷ This is not to criticize Bonhoeffer for advocating an ascetic denial of life's joys, nor to deny the profound understanding of love grounded in Christ's salvation in *Sanctorum Communio*. Rather, it highlights the need to connect authentic feelings with the authentic presence of Christ.

Scheler's concept of "vicarious feeling," or "co-feeling," may offer valuable insights here. The GMBC case study provides an example of a conventional caring experience: when Pantelis* experienced despair, Vasilios*, despite a seemingly clumsy approach, offered unexpectedly authentic encouragement. Pantelis*

⁶³³ SC, 167.

⁶³⁴ SC, 168.

⁶³⁵ Ibid.

⁶³⁶ SC, 191.

⁶³⁷ SC, 169.

perceived God's love motivating Vasilios*'s actions and consequently felt encouraged by that divine love. (See 3.2.2) While a singular case, it highlights the limitations of human love while simultaneously revealing the unpredictable power of love within a shared life.

This perspective does not negate the fatigue and difficulty inherent in church ministry, particularly within leadership teams, nor does it dismiss efforts to improve communication efficiency and enhance enjoyment. According to Bonhoeffer, "there is no such thing as a pure, organic community life."⁶³⁸ means the earthly coexistence of the "community of sinners" and the "community of saints" perpetually entails the interplay of pain and joy, depletion and nourishment, and order and chaos.⁶³⁹ Leaders should not feel pressured to provide perfect, permanent solutions, but rather, within the imperfections of human nature and relationships, should continue to share experiences and act for others, thereby experiencing a profound sense of fulfillment and joy.

7.5.4 Beyond "Soldiers" and "Sheep": Bridging Generational Divides

The preceding analysis reveals a tension within GMBC between two dominant images: the "soldier" and the "sheep." Often associated with the first and second generations, respectively, these metaphors, while not inherently negative, can create a divide and limit the church's understanding of Christian community. The Bonhoefferian model, with its emphasis on "Christ existing as community," offers a powerful alternative, transforming these images and fostering a more integrated and nuanced vision.

The "soldier" image, prevalent among first-generation leaders in GMBC, highlights valuable qualities like strength and commitment, as previously analyzed, but it can also stifle individual initiative and creativity, potentially contributing to the pressures experienced by the second generation. The Bonhoefferian model transforms the notion of obedience, shifting from a potentially rigid understanding to an obedience to Christ that manifests as shared responsibility and service within the collective.⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁸ SC, 213.

⁶³⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁰ SC, 179.

Members contribute actively, utilizing their individual gifts from the Holy Spirit, rather than passively following orders.⁶⁴¹ Discipline evolves from rigid adherence to rules towards Christ-like formation, nurtured through shared spiritual practices and mutual accountability. Service, not top-down command, becomes the defining characteristic of both leadership and participation.

The "sheep" image, while emphasizing guidance and care, can inadvertently promote passivity and dependence, limiting individual agency and potentially hindering the second generation's desire for greater involvement. The Bonhoefferian model transforms this image by empowering individuals through vicarious representation, enabling them to act for and with others.⁶⁴² The concept of the "collective person," discussed previously, is also relevant here, transcending the simplistic shepherd-sheep dynamic. Mutual care and support become the collective responsibility of all members, not solely that of a designated leader.

Finally, bridging this generational divide, as in many Chinese church communities, is undeniably challenging. Bonhoeffer provides an intriguing, paradoxical argument regarding the "unity of spirit of the church-community—the collective person" suggests that "the more powerfully dissimilarity manifests itself in the struggle, the stronger the objective unity."⁶⁴³ Whether Bonhoeffer himself fully explored the practical implications of this concept remains debatable. Nevertheless, the aforementioned relational frameworks may facilitate an interaction where no one is silenced, but rather, "in the community all are led to carry their individual viewpoints to the limit, to be really serious about it," and amidst genuine struggle, "remember the One who is over them both, and in whom both of them are one"⁶⁴⁴ —the true reality of unity exists only in Christ as "the One who is beyond every other,"⁶⁴⁵ and also the One "existing as Church-community."

⁶⁴¹ SC, 161.

⁶⁴² SC, 182.

⁶⁴³ SC, 192.

⁶⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁴⁵ SC, 199.

7.6 Transforming the Biblical Faith: Cultivating a Pneumatological Space

Finally, while the Bible serves as the foundational symbolic authority and primary source of imagery for the elders of GMBC, their predominantly literal interpretation, though central to their personal devotion and church leadership, may limit their theological understanding and ecclesial practices, functioning as both a resource and a constraint for their lived theology. This does not negate the importance of doctrinal or systematic theology, but rather emphasizes how fostering critical reflection on existing biblical practices can create a stronger connection between daily life and formal theology.

Specifically, how can the Christocentric approach to the Bible discussed in Chapter 6 enrich their lived theological expression and reflection, particularly by addressing their metaphorical images? Facilitating such a transformation is vital for fostering leadership development, intergenerational dialogue, and communal discernment regarding the church's future.

While not a dedicated work of biblical interpretation, Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* remains remarkably helpful in addressing this issue. It integrates a perspective on Scripture within its ecclesiology, particularly connecting it to the centrality of Christ and "objective spirit", making it especially relevant for exploring approaches to Scripture within the contexts of community and leadership. In the next section, I draw primarily on David Emerton's concept of "pneumatological space", itself based on *Sanctorum Communio*, with the aim of constructing a view of the Bible that is relevant to Chinese churches and lay leaders. I then delineate some of what I see as its practical implications.

7.6.1 Scripture and the Spirit: Creating Space for Encounter

Drawing on Bonhoeffer's pneumatology in *Sanctorum Communio*, Emerton explores how the concept of "pneumatological space" illuminates Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology and its implications for Christian community, particularly in contexts of displacement and evolving identities. Emerton highlights how Bonhoeffer, while emphasizing Christ's presence within the empirical community, also underscores the Holy Spirit's

role in establishing the church's spatiotemporal existence. Pentecost, the descent of the Spirit, is presented as the genesis of the church's empirical form and function,⁶⁴⁶ marking the creation of a distinct pneumatological space—set apart from the world yet existing within and for it.⁶⁴⁷ This space is not merely a physical location but a “confessional space”, a sphere within which the church proclaims the Word and bears witness to the gospel.⁶⁴⁸ As Emerton highlights, Bonhoeffer identifies this space as the locus of proclamation, where “witness is given through the Holy Spirit of God.”⁶⁴⁹ This resonates with Bonhoeffer's broader theology of the Word and Spirit, where the Spirit illuminates Scripture, making Christ present and enabling its ongoing relevance.⁶⁵⁰ Furthermore, citing Bonhoeffer's argument regarding the church's objective spirit as “the bearer of the social activity of the Holy Spirit,”⁶⁵¹ Emerton further elucidates the concept of pneumatological space. Within this space, the objective spirit operates through established forms and practices—preaching, sacraments, ministries—acting as dynamic channels for the Holy Spirit's work,⁶⁵² rather than being tied to static institutions or hierarchies.

Emerton's innovative interpretation of Bonhoeffer resonates with other scholars, particularly regarding the relationship between pneumatological space and Scripture. As Emerton observes, Bonhoeffer viewed Scripture not merely as text, but as the primary medium of God's self-revelation, illuminated and made contemporary by the Holy Spirit.⁶⁵³ This resonates with Mawson's observation that Bonhoeffer, influenced by Karl Barth, “enthusiastically promotes an understanding of the Bible as God's freely chosen locus of revelation”.⁶⁵⁴ Mawson also highlights Bonhoeffer's belief that the Spirit illuminates the text, making Christ present to the reader.⁶⁵⁵ This “contemporizing” work of the Spirit makes Scripture's timeless truths relevant and

⁶⁴⁶ Emerton, *God's Church-Community*, 113-8.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 114-5.

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibdi.*, 128.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 128-9.

⁶⁵¹ SC, 233; Emerton, *God's Church-Community*, 128n99.

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*, 129-30.

⁶⁵³ *Ibid.*, 128.

⁶⁵⁴ Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community*, 125.

⁶⁵⁵ Emerton, *God's Church-Community*, 126.

applicable to the present moment.⁶⁵⁶ Bonhoeffer's "orientation to substance,"⁶⁵⁷ his insistence on engaging with the concrete words of the text, further reinforces the notion that the Bible facilitates a space where the Spirit's activity fosters encounters with God and one another, thereby forming community around the shared Word.

This concept of "space" can be further explored through dialogue with other contemporary interpretations of Bonhoeffer, such as Christopher Holmes's reading of *Sanctorum Communio*.⁶⁵⁸ Holmes emphasizes the role of Christ, arguing that the Spirit actualizes the reality of Christ, the Word made flesh, within the church. For Bonhoeffer, according to Holmes, the Spirit's work is always Christocentric, directing attention not to itself but to Christ. Holmes describes the church community, as a reality in Christ, as "the locus of the Spirit's work."⁶⁵⁹ He stresses that the actualization of this reality occurs through the Spirit's work: "The church does not need, thankfully, to rely on itself to actualize itself...it only needs to rest in the Spirit's re-making of it in accordance with the image of Christ."⁶⁶⁰ Specifically, Holmes emphasizes the relationship between the Spirit's work and Scripture:

First, we listen to the Spirit in listening to the whole of Scripture. The Spirit speaks through the Bible, the word of God from the Bible. We listen to the Bible not as an end in itself but so as to hear the Spirit speak in the Bible, because the Bible is Christ's testimony. The Spirit's coming is not immediate; no, the Spirit comes to us through the word of Scripture.⁶⁶¹

In essence, Holmes's interpretation of Bonhoeffer suggests a dynamic, ongoing relationship where the Spirit continually makes Christ present within the church. In this vital Christocentric vision, Scripture, as the Word of God, is constitutive of this pneumatological space and serves as the primary medium through which the

⁶⁵⁶ Mawson, *Christ Existing as Community*, 127-8.

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.

⁶⁵⁸ Christopher R. J. Holmes, "The Holy Spirit," in *The Oxford Handbook of Dietrich Bonhoeffer*, ed. Philip G. Ziegler and Michael Mawson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 168–78.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁶⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

community encounters Christ. Empowered by the Spirit within this space, believers are transformed as they come to understand Christ's nature and will, recall his words, and are guided toward conformity with his image.

It is crucial, however, to acknowledge a significant theological distinction between the context from which this concept emerges and that of GMBC. For Bonhoeffer, a Lutheran, and Emerton, an Anglican, the "pneumatological space" is made tangible pre-eminently through the sacraments. As Emerton details, the "space of proclamation" is most concretely expressed in Baptism and the Eucharist, where the Spirit's action and Christ's presence are objectively given.⁶⁶² This high sacramental theology does not align with the ecclesial reality of GMBC, which, as a "Bible Church" rooted in a low-church evangelical tradition, holds a more symbolic or memorialist view of the sacraments (3.3.1).

This theological divergence does not invalidate the use of "pneumatological space" as a constructive tool, but it does require a contextual adaptation. If the foundational principle of this space is the Holy Spirit making Christ present through the Word and in community, then its primary locus of experience will vary according to ecclesial tradition. For a community like GMBC, whose identity is overwhelmingly defined by its commitment to Scripture, the primary "pneumatological space" is not the sacramental table but the Bible itself. The intense, communal, and devotional engagement with Scripture functions as the principal arena where the community encounters Christ, where the Spirit guides and convicts, and where their "objective spirit" is formed. Therefore, the task of transformation is to enrich this existing practice, moving from a potentially restrictive Biblicism towards a more dynamic and Christocentric engagement within this scriptural space.

7.6.2 Cultivating Life in the Word: Transforming the "Bible Church"

The concept of a "pneumatological space" establishes a sphere where the Spirit

⁶⁶² Emerton, *God's Church-Community*, 130-33.

illuminates Scripture, making Christ present within the community. But how does this space relate to the diverse images and metaphors found within the Bible itself? To explore this dynamic, this section draws inspiration from Tzu-Ch'en (T. C.) Chao's richly detailed vision of an ideal Chinese church, using it not as a direct equivalent, but as a creative resource for re-imagining the Bible itself as a virtual "pneumatological space" for a community like GMBC.

In a 1926 article considering the future of Christianity in China, T. C. Chao offered a strikingly bold and creative vision for a contextualized Chinese church space. He described his ideal church as follows:

As for the construction of churches, ... we can adapt and improve their design to better suit the needs of our country. Each church should be arranged with a lecture hall (講堂), a chapel (禮拜堂), a reading room (閱書室), and a place for self-cultivation (修養處). The complexity of the arrangement depends on the specific requirements of each location ... If a church has ten assistant pastors, it can hold five sermon sessions on Sundays. Those who come to listen to the sermons can arrive in the early morning, before noon, in the afternoon, in the evening, or at dusk. The chapel should remain open seven days a week, day and night, with a sacred altar where serene incense is burned. Surrounding the altar are smaller altars(小壇) with prayer mats(蒲墊), each holding a Bible securely placed so it cannot be moved. Worshippers can kneel before these altars to silently pray and read scriptures, serving God with reverence. Each small altar accommodates one person. The number of altars depends on the local needs and the size of the church. The largest churches should have a monastery(修道院) at the rear, a library(圖書館) on the side, and two rows of large trees in front to signify beauty and purity(莊嚴清淨). Those who aspire to spiritual cultivation can enter the monastery according to its regulations. Spiritual cultivation does not mean renouncing the world(出家), but rather seeking inner peace and moral refinement (收心養德) for serving God in greater works (為上帝作更大的工).⁶⁶³

It is crucial to understand Chao's vision on its own terms. Writing from a liberal theological perspective deeply engaged with Confucian thought, his concept of "self-cultivation" (修養, xiūyǎng) is primarily an ethical and moral pursuit for the sake of

⁶⁶³ Tzu-Ch'en Chao(趙紫宸, Zhao Zichen), "基督教在中國的前途" [The Future of Christianity in China], *真理與生命* [Truth and Life] 1, no. 12 (1926), reprinted in *Collected Works of Zhao Zichen*, vol. 3 (Beijing: Commercial Press, 2007), 234-35.

service. His vision was not explicitly pneumatological. However, it is precisely this rich spatial and ethical vision that can be theologically re-appropriated and re-imagined through a Bonhoefferian lens. This study does not impose a foreign meaning onto Chao's text; rather, it brings his vision into a constructive dialogue with Bonhoeffer's pneumatology.

Chao's chapel, with its individual altars for solitary prayer, resonates with Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the individual's encounter with God, while his inclusion of a lecture hall and library mirrors the Bonhoefferian church as a learning community. In this re-reading, Chao's "place for self-cultivation" is transformed from a site of human moral effort into a dynamic space of Spirit-empowered engagement, where active devotion becomes the very practice through which the community encounters Christian truth.

Chao envisions Scripture's intensive exposition during Sunday services, affirming the Bible's authority in the church. Yet, his chapel, constantly open, transcends Sunday worship, becoming a space for ongoing communion with God symbolized by the ever-burning incense. "Smaller altars," each with an immobile Bible, invite individual encounters with God through Scripture, guided by the Spirit. This aligns with Bonhoeffer's emphasis on the individual's solitary encounter with God and Scripture within the community.⁶⁶⁴ Moreover Chao's sequential highlighting of the "lecture hall," "chapel," and "reading room" mirrors Emerton's emphasis on the Word as central to "pneumatological space," specifically as a "space of proclamation."⁶⁶⁵ Furthermore, Chao prioritizes continuous learning and teaching alongside worship.⁶⁶⁶ The envisioned monastery, library, and symbolic trees further represent this cultivation, growth, and fruitfulness, deeply resonating with Bonhoeffer's concept of the church as both a learning community and a body maturing in Christ.⁶⁶⁷

While realizing Chao's vision in a physical space, especially in Hong Kong, is

⁶⁶⁴ SC, 161.

⁶⁶⁵ Emerton, *God's Church-Community*, 128.

⁶⁶⁶ SC, 228-30.

⁶⁶⁷ SC, 226-30, 246.

challenging, I suggest its realization by envisioning the Bible as a "gallery of images," thereby creating a "pneumatological space" for the community. This reconceptualizes the Bible not as a static source of rules, but as a dynamic space for encounter. Individuals are encouraged to approach Scripture with reverence, but their personal interpretations are tested and enriched through dialogue with the other images in the gallery and with the community. The "objective spirit" of the community is thus discerned through the unity and diversity of these images, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Re-imagining the space begins with reconceptualizing the Bible not merely as a source of knowledge, but as a dynamic "gallery of biblical images." Individuals are encouraged to humbly encounter the scriptures, approaching them with reverence. However, personal or inherited interpretations of specific biblical images within this gallery should be tested and enriched by other images within the Bible, and through genuine dialogue and mutual learning within the community. In other words, the objective spirit of this community is discerned through the unity and diversity of biblical images and the plurality of interpretations, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. These images thus pertain to both the collective and the individual, the present and the eschaton. Within this metaphorical gallery, the great traditions of Christianity are not merely distant, dusty texts, but living voices of past generations, accessible to present members. Mediated through these images and mutual cultivation, creeds and theological doctrines resonate more deeply within both communal and individual daily life, serving as a guide for lived faith.

Amidst this diversity of images, the image of Christ stands at the center of the gallery. All surrounding biblical images point towards this focal point, and the diverse emotions and thoughts evoked by these images are acknowledged and articulated, not to enforce uniformity, but to draw individuals collectively towards the image of Christ. In this process, elders do not control the space, but rather, rooted in lived experience, embody "beauty and purity" through authentic presence and service. They act as gallery guides, illuminating Christ's centrality within each image and individual life, facilitating an ongoing, shared process of reflection and reinterpretation grounded in Christ. This process seeks mutual enrichment, transcending individual differences and tensions. In this process, the community,

encountering its own history and origins within this space, identifies with the redemptive narrative of Christ and embarks on a shared exploration of the future.

While this "pneumatological space" does not replace the church's other functions, it provides a vital setting—both enclosed for nurture and open for mission—shaped by the Holy Spirit and mediated through Scripture. Here, in this virtual gallery, the community can encounter God and one another, offering a profound response to the spiritual needs of the "Hong Kong drifters."

7.7 Weaving the Threads: Christ, Community, and the Transformation of Leadership

This chapter has endeavored to weave together the lived experiences of leadership at GMBC with the rich theological concepts of Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio*. The aim was not to validate a predetermined framework, but rather to cultivate the theological reflection and transformation, allowing Bonhoeffer's insights to illuminate the realities of a Chinese diaspora church within the Christian theological tradition. The concept of "Christ existing as community" served as the central thread, a dynamic principle challenging static and potentially limiting notions of both church and leadership.

Bonhoeffer's ecclesiology provided a critical lens for examining the tensions within GMBC's lived theology. The limitations of the "Home" metaphor, particularly its fragility in the context of diaspora and generational change, found a corrective and enrichment in the concept of the "collective person." This concept offered a more robust understanding of belonging rooted not in shared location or language, but in the shared life in Christ. This shift resonated with second-generation elders' desire for a more expansive and dynamic ecclesiology, inspiring the emergence of "Christ as a drifter" as a more contextually relevant metaphor. Integrating insights from cognitive linguistics, this image reframed the experience of displacement as a shared journey of faith, echoing Christ's own identity and ministry: called to be *with* and *for* others in the community as well as in the world, though not belonging to the world.

Simultaneously, Bonhoeffer's concept of vicarious representation provided a framework for transforming the understanding of the leadership of a non-denominational Chinese evangelical church as GMBC. The connotations of the "soldier" image, such as commitment and courage, were reinterpreted and

transformed through the lens of mutual care, shared responsibility, and community service. This reframing shifted the focus from individual traits and hierarchical structures to the embodiment of Christ's self-giving love, integrating the positive aspects of the "soldier" metaphor with the compassion associated with the "sheep" metaphor while mitigating their respective limitations. This resulted in a more nuanced and holistic vision of leadership, grounded in the reciprocal dynamics of the "collective person."

Finally, Bonhoeffer's understanding of Scripture and the Spirit, as articulated in the concept of "pneumatological space," offered a transformative approach to biblical engagement. By envisioning the Bible as a "gallery of biblical images," the chapter encouraged a move beyond primarily literal interpretations toward a deeper appreciation for the diverse metaphors and narratives within Scripture. This imagery, rather than supplanting the church's functions and operations, fostered theological reflection and intergenerational dialogue, empowering the community to discern its unique calling within the broader narrative of God's redemptive work.

This chapter, therefore, has not sought to provide definitive answers but rather to illuminate a pathway for ongoing theological reflection and transformation within GMBC. By bringing Bonhoeffer's theology into conversation with the lived experiences of the community, we have created a space for discerning a more contextually appropriate and theologically robust understanding of church and leadership. This sets the stage for the broader conclusions of this thesis, which will explore the wider implications of this study and suggest future avenues for research and reflection.

Conclusion

Having reached this point, this project's journey of "faith seeking understanding" concludes. The following section will recap my revised pastoral cycle's four "faith seeking..." tasks, summarizing and reviewing the study's findings, implications, and limitations, while also illuminating future research directions.

Articulation of the Lived Theology

Revisiting the study's starting point, and the foremost of all tasks, was the authentic pursuit to understand and clearly articulate the lived theology of leadership among lay leaders, particularly how they perceive the church, their self-identity, and the biblical faith informing their practices. This constituted the first three, primarily descriptive, research questions. Summarizing the preceding findings, they can be succinctly stated as follows:

The lay leaders at GMBC perceived the church community primarily through the metaphor of "Home," a central yet contested ecclesiological construct, particularly for the first-generation elders. Grounded in shared language, physical space, and familial values, this image initially fostered a strong sense of belonging and stability for the "Hong Kong drifters". Elders' narratives often idealized "Home" as a refuge from the inherent transience of diaspora, emphasizing its role in providing spiritual and emotional security. However, the lived reality of GMBC revealed inherent contradictions within this idealized image. The church's forced relocation, experienced as a traumatic "loss of Home," destabilized the security associated with this metaphor, exposing its inherent fragility. Furthermore, the evolving needs of a younger generation, less invested in the "Home" narrative and desiring a more dynamic and engaged ecclesiology, generated intergenerational tension. Second-generation elders, while valuing community, expressed concerns regarding the limitations of a static and bounded understanding of church. This disruption of the "Home" ideal prompted a search for alternative metaphors—such as a "ship adrift"—revealing underlying tensions and a growing desire for a more nuanced, inclusive, and contextually relevant ecclesiology. The struggle to maintain the "Home" ideal

amidst these challenges underscores the dynamic and contested nature of ecclesiological imagery within a diaspora context.

While GMBC formally espoused a collective leadership model, the research revealed a generational divergence in leadership perceptions, framed by the contrasting metaphors of "Soldiers of Christ" and the "sheep-leading-sheep." For the first-generation elders, the "Soldier" image resonated profoundly. Drawing upon biblical imagery of spiritual warfare and disciplined obedience, they understood leadership as a sacred duty requiring sacrifice and unwavering commitment. This "soldier" identity provided strength and motivation, particularly within the challenging context of establishing a new church in a foreign land. Their narratives emphasized the importance of strong, decisive leadership to protect the congregation from external threats and maintain doctrinal purity.

However, this image also carried hierarchical implications, with its emphasis on rank and obedience, creating internal tensions within the collective leadership structure. In contrast, the second-generation elders, while respecting the dedication of their predecessors, expressed reservations about the rigidity and top-down dynamics associated with the "soldier" model. They envisioned leadership more in terms of shepherding, emphasizing pastoral care, nurturing relationships, and empowering the congregation. Their narratives highlighted the importance of collaboration, shared decision-making, and a less militaristic approach. They sought a more contextualized and relational approach, emphasizing service, empathy, and community engagement.

This generational shift reflected not only differing leadership styles but also divergent ecclesiological visions—one focused on protecting boundaries, the other on fostering growth and connection within the community and with the wider society. The second generation questioned the "soldier" identity's potential for detachment from the broader community, hindering engagement with social issues and intercultural dialogue. They envisioned leadership as empowering the "sheep" to discover and utilize their own gifts for the flourishing of the community. This generational divergence in understanding and embodying leadership—navigating between "soldiers" and "sheep"—highlights the need for a more nuanced and contextually

relevant theology of lay leadership, one that integrates the strength and discipline of the "soldier" with the aspects of compassion and relationality.

The ethnographic data revealed a dynamic interplay among biblical faith, lived experience, and meaning-making within GMBC leadership. While both generations of elders affirmed biblical authority, the data suggests two distinct, interconnected functions of scripture in their lived experience: as a symbol of authority and a source of theological imagery. Leadership beliefs, particularly concerning theological metaphors, are subject to interpretations influenced by personal and emotional factors, leading to diverse understandings and even disagreements. These approaches, however, coexist across generations, with varying individual emphasis and expression.

Regarding the Bible as a symbol of authority, it functions as a powerful legitimizing force for decisions and practices. Both generations frequently invoked terms like "Biblical" or "fitting the Bible" to align leadership with perceived divinely ordained standards, reinforcing its legitimacy within the community. This symbolic use of scripture is evident in the justification of the "Bible Church" model for congregational unity and the defense of collective leadership as "Biblical," despite acknowledged inefficiencies. Even the description of a "Biblical elder," while grounded in personal examples, utilizes the term "Biblical" to signify divine endorsement and ideal leadership. This approach, while providing a shared language and stability, can also limit the acceptance of diversity.

The Bible also serves as a rich source of metaphorical images, metaphors, and narratives that shape understanding, evoke emotional responses, and inspire action. Both generations utilize these images, though their specific selections and interpretations may differ. Many elders referenced biblical images and figures to articulate their faith experiences and ecclesial understandings. For example, the reflection on King Saul serves as a cautionary tale against the abuse of power, while the "Soldiers of Christ" metaphor demonstrates how biblical imagery shapes leadership perspectives. The identification with Timothy illustrates how these images can operate on a deeper, personal level, providing strength and guidance through relatable narratives and archetypes. A notable pattern is that, while both generations

frequently invoke biblical authority, direct references to rigid "Biblical principles" are less common. This suggests that a codified, principle-based approach to scripture holds less influence than a more nuanced, imagery-based approach. However, the selective use or overreliance on specific biblical images, without critical reflection on their context and potential for multiple interpretations, risks biased and even manipulative applications.

My goal in this thesis was not to presuppose or artificially construct a coherent lived theology among the lay leaders. Instead, it respectfully presented the ambiguities and diversities within their beliefs, including inherent tensions and even conflicts, recognizing their "grassroots" and bottom-up characteristics. However, this presentation does not imply their theological inferiority compared to propositional theology. As subsequent stages reveal, these lived theologies are not simply "raw materials" for theological reflection but rather conversational partners in theological dialogue and mutual enrichment.

Interdisciplinary Collaboration for Deep Understanding

The subsequent three "faith seeking..." tasks were, in a sense, guided by the fourth research question, which explored how to pursue reflection and transformation. This unfolded through interdisciplinary dialogue surrounding the ethnographic data, engaging other ethnographic studies as well as missiology, organizational studies, and cognitive linguistics. I also drew on theological sources in this collaborative and critical dialogue with relevant disciplinary theories.

Regarding the image of the church community, ethnographic studies offer crucial insights into Chinese churches. This study contrasts two theological approaches: Ray S. Anderson's doctrinal lens of kenosis and ekstasis, and Alexander Chow's culturally nuanced "surrogate family" led by "public intellectuals." While Anderson's framework highlights the importance of theological grounding, its limited engagement with lived experience and cultural context, as exemplified by the "new family" metaphor, reveals a gap between doctrinal ideals and practical application. Chow, conversely, attends to the specificities of the Chinese context, yet his framework

requires further development to address evolving family dynamics and generational shifts within diaspora communities. This contrast underscores the need for a more dynamic and contextually sensitive approach. Confucian reflections on belonging, particularly the concepts of reciprocity and mutual enrichment, offer valuable resources for such an approach, challenging the limitations of static ecclesiological metaphors and contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the church within the Chinese diaspora.

Similarly, when discussing leadership identities, missiological lenses provided valuable historical context for the "soldier" image, while also revealing its limitations. Organizational leadership models, in turn, offered richer insights into diverse perspectives on Christian leadership. While Chloe Lynch's critique of managerialism is insightful, her overly sharp distinction between leadership and management, while highlighting the dangers of managerialism, overlooks their nuanced interplay in lived experience. Furthermore, Lynch's dismissal of organizational leadership theories from business contexts limits her understanding of group dynamics, power dynamics, and other factors relevant to leadership within any organization, including the church. As the analysis indicates, neglecting these real dynamics can lead to an idealistic perspective that overlooks the complexities of human behavior within organizations.

In reflecting on biblical faith as the theological foundation for GMBC leaders, Brian Malley's work on North American conservative evangelical Biblicism proved crucial. It not only illuminated the dynamics of authority and the practical "transitivity" of this faith but also highlighted its potential vulnerability in accommodating diversity. However, Malley's analysis, by way of contrast, further underscored the significance of a metaphorical approach for GMBC and Chinese Christians more broadly. Supported by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's theoretical framework on metaphors, this opens a new avenue for constructing a contextually appropriate theology of leadership for the Chinese context. While this direction does not demand uniformity of belief, it necessitates a shared focal point to foster consensus. Engaging relevant discussions by Christian Smith and biblical scholars highlights the value of a Christocentric approach, suggesting further directions for theological

integration and transformation.

Connecting and Transforming through "Christ Existing as Community"

The subsequent research tasks engage the identified metaphors and images through a Bonhoefferian lens, specifically his concept of "Christ Existing as Community" from *Sanctorum Communio*, offering transformative potential. This dialogue stems from the already-perceived depth and relevance of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theology to the Chinese church context. It is important to note that my goal in this section was not to privilege Bonhoeffer's theology above others previously discussed, but rather to recognize its integrative capacity, combining interdisciplinary openness with theological integrity. This facilitates a reciprocal connection: systematically integrating the lived theology of a group like GMBC with the Christian tradition, while simultaneously enriching the tradition through engagement with GMBC's lived context and experiences, fostering holistic faith reflection and renewal.

Bonhoeffer's "Christ existing as community" offers a powerful lens for reimagining church and leadership at GMBC. His emphasis on vicarious representation, mutual care, and shared "objective spirit" challenges the static "Home" metaphor, providing a more dynamic understanding of belonging rooted in Christ's presence, not just shared location or language. This resonates with the second-generation elders' desire for a more expansive ecclesiology. Building on Bonhoeffer's "collective person," the image of "Christ as a drifter"—integrating Lakoff and Johnson's insights on metaphor—emerges as a compelling narrative for navigating the fluidity of diaspora. This reframes displacement, acknowledging its inherent precariousness (as captured by the "ship adrift" metaphor), as a shared journey of faith, echoing Christ's ministry and emphasizing the church's call to embrace the marginalized.

Reframing the "Soldiers of Christ" image through Bonhoeffer's concept of vicarious representation transforms leadership from a burden into a shared service. By emphasizing mutual care and the cultivation of a shared "objective spirit," leadership becomes a collaborative endeavor grounded in Christ's example. This shift acknowledges the limitations and vulnerabilities of leaders while empowering them to

act for one another and the community. Cultivating a "pneumatological space," informed by Bonhoeffer's understanding of Scripture and the Spirit, transforms biblical engagement. Moving beyond a primarily literal interpretation to a deeper appreciation for the rich tapestry of biblical images and narratives fosters theological reflection and intergenerational dialogue. This approach empowers lay leaders to connect with Scripture meaningfully and apply its teachings to their lived experiences. The Bible, envisioned as a "gallery of biblical images," becomes a space for encounter with Christ and one another, fostering a deeper understanding of the church's identity and mission.

Academic Contribution and Broader Relevance

In substantiating its central argument, this study has made contributions to several fields, extending its relevance beyond the immediate context of Chinese churches.

For practical theology and ecclesiology, this thesis has demonstrated the analytical power of using metaphorical images as a primary lens for understanding lived theology. The revised pastoral cycle, moving from articulation through collaboration to transformation, offers a replicable methodological framework for future research. Furthermore, the constructive proposal in Chapter 7, which brings Bonhoeffer's *Sanctorum Communio* into dialogue with a contemporary, non-Western church, contributes a novel perspective to both Bonhoeffer studies and the theology of the diaspora church.

For the sociology and anthropology of religion, this work serves as a detailed ethnographic case study. It has extended the work of scholars like Fenggang Yang by examining the dynamics of "adhesive identity" in the unique context of Hong Kong, and it has built upon Brian Malley's work on Biblicism by showing how metaphorical interpretation functions as a key mode of "transitivity" in a Chinese evangelical setting.

For Chinese and Asian diaspora studies, the thesis provides a critical, emic perspective that resists cultural essentialism. By engaging with Vincent Shen's

philosophical concept of "mutual enrichment," it models a way for theological inquiry to interact respectfully with Confucian thought, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of cultural and religious identity formation among diaspora communities.

Finally, for leadership and organizational studies, this research has illustrated how theories of paternalistic and shared leadership can be critically applied to analyze the complex dynamics of a volunteer-led religious organization. The findings highlight the culturally specific nature of leadership and affirm recent research on the "unshared burdens" that can emerge in collaborative models, offering valuable insights for scholars studying leadership beyond the corporate world.

Limitations of this Research

Revisiting the pastoral cycle as I conclude the thesis also reveals certain limitations of this study. Primarily, while the study addressed the lived theology of elders within the church, it did not adequately address their interactions with other co-workers, particularly salaried staff. In the case of GMBC, lay elders serve as governing leaders, while salaried staff, including pastors and ministers, manage daily operations and pastoral care. However, these roles overlap, creating a complex power dynamic that requires further investigation beyond the scope of this present study. While the first generation articulated their perspectives on pastors based primarily on their experiences in North American churches, both generations of elders refrained from discussing specific interactions with GMBC pastors and ministers in detail. This reticence was partly due to ethical considerations of confidentiality, but also significantly influenced by my own role as a salaried staff member at GMBC, which created a potential power imbalance and may have constrained open and candid discussions about these interactions. I suspect this gap may have obscured certain aspects of the elders' lived theology, particularly concerning their understanding of authority, collaboration, and the relationship between ordained ministry and lay leadership. For example, I might have missed nuances in their views on the respective roles and responsibilities of elders and pastors, potential tensions between these roles, and how these dynamics play out in

the practical life of the church.

The focus on male leadership, while reflecting the current reality at GMBC, excluded the voices and perspectives of women, a significant gap that future research must address. My observations suggest that despite the significant influence of women, including other female deacons or staff members, such as the children's ministry director and administrator, as well as elders' wives, their voices, particularly their lived theology, remain largely unheard. However, incorporating this dynamic would significantly increase the study's complexity, particularly regarding participant selection. Another related challenging decision involved whether to interview the elders' families, particularly their spouses. Pilot explorations revealed the significant, albeit often hidden, roles played by elders' spouses—a common phenomenon in broader Chinese church contexts where women's voices are frequently marginalized than the male lay leaders. However, considering GMBC's specific context and the study's scope, I reluctantly deferred this important perspective. This decision does not endorse male-dominated leadership models but acknowledges the risk of inadvertently further marginalizing spouses' voices within the study if not handled with appropriate care and depth. This concern extends to the elders' children, who undoubtedly play significant roles. Therefore, I offer this study as a starting point, focusing on the most visible aspects, and as a foundation for further, more in-depth research.

Furthermore, from a theological perspective, a significant limitation of this study is its lack of engagement with sacramental theology and, more broadly, the theology of ministry within various Christian traditions. This omission is particularly relevant given Bonhoeffer's emphasis on sacraments in *Sanctorum Communio* and the rich theological discourse surrounding ministry and ordination. While the elders did not explicitly mention sacraments when discussing leadership, their practice of administering communion in GMBC's regular worship highlights a potential disconnect between their lived theology of leadership and the church's sacramental practice. This gap merits further investigation, as it could reveal deeper insights into the elders' understanding of Christ's presence, ecclesial community, and the role of ordained ministry. My research, however, did not delve into these theological

dimensions, primarily due to data limitations. Most first-generation elders had retired by the study's commencement, precluding direct observation of their sacramental practices and limiting access to any recordings or texts of their communion administrations. Furthermore, my own involvement in the pastoral team at GMBC created a complex dynamic. Second-generation elders, some administering communion for the first time, often sought guidance from me on procedures and prayer scripts. This reliance on my expertise, while understandable given my pastoral role, inadvertently limited opportunities for observing and analyzing their own practices and understanding of sacramental theology. This limitation underscores the need for future research to explore the intersection of lived theology, sacramental practice, and ordained ministry within Chinese diaspora churches. Such research could examine how lay leaders understand and participate in sacramental rituals, how these practices shape their understanding of leadership, and how their lived theology interacts with established theological traditions regarding ministry and ordination.

Avenues for Future Research

Building on the identified limitations, this study suggests several avenues for future research within broader Chinese Christian communities. Expanding the scope to include pastors, paid staff, deacons, and group leaders would provide a more comprehensive understanding of leadership dynamics, illuminating the interplay between ordained and lay leadership. Incorporating the perspectives of elders' families (particularly spouses and children) would further enrich this understanding by revealing the social and familial contexts of ministry. Critically, there should be research focusing on the roles and voices of women in Chinese church communities, exploring their experiences and theological reflections on leadership and how gender shapes ecclesial communities. Comparing the lived theologies of women and men could reveal valuable insights into the diverse expressions of leadership within Chinese Christianity.

Second, the methodological exercise in this study, particularly the revised pastoral cycle and the ethnographic exploration of metaphorical images, offer potential for wider application. Other researchers or practitioners, including the elders

themselves, pastors, theologians, and lay believers, could adapt these approaches in diverse contexts in Hong Kong and other places. Such studies would not only validate the methodologies but also contribute to a richer understanding of church life and leadership across various cultural and social settings.

Third, interdisciplinary collaborations could further deepen the analysis. Engaging with fields such as sociology, anthropology, and organizational studies would allow for a more robust examination of the interplay between church leadership, community dynamics, and broader societal trends. For instance, comparative studies between church leadership and leadership models in other sectors (e.g., businesses, non-profits) could highlight both the unique challenges and the potential innovations within ecclesial contexts. The church and theological discourse need not fear these voices; when viewed through an appropriate lens, they can serve as critical and helpful partners, fostering understanding and maturity.

Fourth, future research could explore specific themes or groups beyond the scope of this study. These include the faith practices of younger generations (e.g., "Hong Kong drifters," university students, young professionals), the church's role in public life, and the impact of digital technologies on church life and leadership. Further investigation of worship and sacramental theology could illuminate the relationship between leadership and worship.

Finally, this study highlights the importance of fostering theological reflection and renewal within the church. Developing a tailored repository of resources based on research findings could support churches and theological institutions in bridging the gap between lived faith and theological tradition. This dialogical approach to theology, particularly relevant in Asian contexts, empowers communities to articulate their grassroots lived theology and engage critically with Western Christian traditions, moving beyond mere syncretism toward a dynamic interplay of connection and critique.

Personal gratitude

As this thesis concludes, a year has passed since I stepped away from my ministerial role to focus on this research. During this time, I suspended my active

participation in GMBC. Throughout this period, the elders, despite their involvement in the study, offered unwavering support and understanding, consistently encouraging me to prioritize its completion. Occasionally, I received messages like this, "... I won't ask about your progress; you are under no pressure. You don't even need to reply—this message is simply to let you know we trust you and are praying for you!" Such gestures of understanding deeply moved me: they understand the anxieties of a PhD candidate so much!

As this research journey culminates, questions linger: Have I become the "liberal" feared by some? What insights might these findings offer the next generation of leaders? What role awaits me upon my return to GMBC? I, myself, have undoubtedly changed throughout this process. Yet, I remain confident that my connection to GMBC, and indeed to the broader Chinese diasporic church, will deepen within the *sanctorum communio* in Christ.

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Appendix I: Sample of Participant Information Sheet

Participant Information Sheet

Project subject: Lay leadership study of a local Chinese Church in Hong Kong

Researcher(s): Wang Ziyang

Department: Theology and Religion

Contact details: [omitted in this thesis]

You are invited to take part in a study that I am conducting as part of my Doctor of Theology and Ministry dissertation. This study has received ethical approval from the Ethics Committee of Durham University.

Before you decide whether to agree to take part it is important for you to understand the purpose of the research and what is involved as a participant. Please read the following information carefully. Please get in contact if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

The rights and responsibilities of anyone taking part in Durham University research are set out in our 'Participants Charter':
<https://www.dur.ac.uk/research.innovation/governance/ethics/considerations/people/charter/>

What is the purpose of the study?

This study aims to find out from the role (or roles) and their leadership styles of lay leaders (say, the elders) of this Church as well as their formation and effects in practices in a local Church community. Theological reflections on their pros and cons may bring beneficial transformations in this community, thus empowering the leaders in the current social context of Hong Kong and cultivating a faithful, inclusive religious life in the community.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You have been invited because you are a current leader / former leader / key figure in this community who may contribute significant information to this study.

Do I have to take part?

Your participation is voluntary, and you do not have to agree to take part. If you do agree to take part, you can withdraw at any time, without giving a reason. Your rights in relation to withdrawing any data that is identifiable to you are explained in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to me if I take part?

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be asked to attend interviews conducted by the researcher. The interview session will last for 1 to 1.5 hours. You may be asked for one or two follow-up interviews. It can be conducted in the places where you feel comfortable, for instance, the rooms in the Church. The online interview is another option for you. The interview sessions will be audio/video-taped.

As stated in the Participant Charter, your dignity and individual contribution will be respected. You are free to express your opinions and feelings in the interview. On the other hand, you are expected to participate in the research honestly. Please note that you may omit any questions you do not wish to answer, and you have the right to withdraw from the research without any reason. There is no payment for the participants in this research.

Are there any potential risks involved?

According to the existing studies with similar topics, visible risks are scarce in the current situation; however, if you have concerns about the potential risks (e.g. the security of participants), please do contact the researcher or other University officers immediately.

Will my data be kept confidential?

All information obtained during the study will be kept confidential. If the data is published, it will be entirely anonymous and will not be identifiable as yours.
Full details are included in the accompanying Privacy Notice.

What will happen to the results of the project?

No personal data will be shared; however, pseudonymised (i.e. not identifiable) data may be used in publications, reports, presentations, web pages and other research outputs. At the end of the project, pseudonymised data may be archived and shared with others for legitimate research purposes.

All research data and records needed to validate the research findings will be stored for ten years (as a standard under the University's data management policy) after August 2023, the submission of my dissertation.

Durham University is committed to sharing the results of its world-class research for public benefit. As part of this commitment, the University has established an online repository for all Durham University Higher Degree theses, which provides access to the full text of freely available theses. The study in which you are invited to participate will be written up as a thesis. On successful submission of the thesis, it will be deposited both in print and online in the University archives to facilitate its use in future research. The thesis will be published open access.

Who do I contact if I have any questions or concerns about this study?

If you have any further questions or concerns about this study, please speak to the researcher or their supervisor. If you remain unhappy or wish to make a formal complaint, please submit a complaint via the University's Complaints Process:
[<https://www.dur.ac.uk/ges/3rdpartycomplaints/>]

Thank you for reading this information and considering taking part in this study.

Updated: Jul. 24, 2022

Appendix II: Sample of Consent Form

Consent Form

Project subject: Lay leadership study of a Mandarin Church in Hong Kong

Researcher: Wang Ziyang

Department: Theology and Religion

Contact details: [omitted in this thesis]

This form is to confirm that you understand what the purposes of the project, what is involved and that you are happy to take part. Please initial each box to indicate your agreement:

I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet dated 24/07/2022 and the privacy notice for the above project.	
I have had sufficient time to consider the information and ask any questions I might have, and I am satisfied with the answers I have been given.	
I understand the research is pseudonymised so that my real name will not be used in the research outputs, say the dissertation, reports or publications.	
I understand who will have access to personal data provided, how the data will be stored and what will happen to the data at the end of the project.	
I agree to take part in the above project.	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving a reason.	
I consent to being audio/video recorded, and understand how recordings will be used in research outputs.	
I agree that my words may be quoted in the research outputs.	

Participant's Signature _____ Date _____ (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS) _____
Researcher's Signature _____ Date _____ (NAME IN BLOCK LETTERS) _____