

Urbanization and Pastoral Responses

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Abstract: The rapid urbanization process fundamentally transformed not only the social landscape of China but also the Chinese Christian community which was once rural dominated. Such social transformation ushers in a large number of formerly rural believers now settling in a new urban context, posing new pastoral challenges to the swelling urban churches as it includes an urban population from diverse social strata. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic transforms social interaction to a new normalcy, which affects all Christian communities, particularly in pastoral care. Responding to such changes, some congregations are developing new pastoral methods, such as virtual worship, chat room prayer groups, chaplaincy services to particular needs, small groups for formation, fellowship and evangelism, and so on. This paper examines the main factors behind this urbanization process, the formation of various urban population groups, challenges to ecclesial communities in ministering to these different urban populations, and pastoral responses that may shape our urban pastoral ministries in days to come, both in China and in other urban regions of the world.

[摘要] 急速的城市化進程不但改變了中國的社會面貌，也從根本上改變了曾經是農村為主的華人基督教團體。這種社會轉變吸引了許多從前生活在農村的信徒，但現在已定居在新的城市環境中，他們對不斷膨脹的城市教會提出了新的牧靈挑戰，因為它包括來自不同社會階層的城市人口。此外，新冠肺炎疫情將社交互動的方式轉變成新常態，這影響了城市基督徒團體，特別是在牧養方面。為了應對這種變化，一些會眾正在開發新的牧民方法，例如虛擬崇拜，聊天室祈禱小組，針對特定需求的牧養服務，成立各種培育、團契和福傳的小團體等。本文探討了這一城市化過程背後的主要因素、不同城市人口群體的形成過程、在不同城市人口群體中建立的教會團體所面對的挑戰，以及未來影響我們城市牧養的回應，無論是在中國還是在世界其他城市地區。

Introduction

In 1985, only 15 percent of the total Chinese population lived in urban areas; by 2020, about 65 percent of the population enjoys an urbanized life style. Within three and a half decades, China has experienced the largest urbanization process in the history of human civilization, transforming more than 700 million people, a population about similar to that of Europe, from rural to urban living. Now the majority of China's population is urban instead of rural, with most of the urban centres concentrated in the central and coastal regions.

There are four major dynamics contributing to this changing profile of population. First, the economic pull factor draws the rural population to these urban centers for higher incomes for low skill labor in the service sectors than if one chooses to stay to till the farm; this pull factor increases the transient population in urban areas, swelling the urban population concentrated at the lower economic spectrum of the social strata. Second, these urban centres attract talents from all over the country seeking new jobs and opportunities, especially students from rural areas, who attend higher education institutions in these urban centres, and choose to remain there after graduation to service the increasing demand for talent in these cities. Third, there is the rapid integration of surrounding rural districts into the expanding urban centres, which transform hundreds of millions of a rural population into an urban population, especially at the periphery of the metropolis, serving as suburban areas for

the growing cities. Fourth, many of the county seats and municipality seats in the peripheral and interior provinces had traditionally been rural areas and now classify as urban areas, not only to reflect the increase of economic income meeting the criteria of urbanization, but also to meet the targeted goal for urbanization set by the Central Government for these peripheral provinces. Therefore, many of these formerly rural populations are rapidly ushered into urban residency by bureaucratic means, and many are still in the process of transforming their rural living habits into urban modes, such as the use of flush toilets, following traffic signals, or not raising livestock at home or on a balcony. Therefore, one can easily observe a whole range of the urban population at different stages of the urbanization process, as well as the different settings of urbanization. All these social changes affect not only the socio-cultural mode of the Chinese population as a whole, but also, since most of our readers are interested in Christianity in China, they must know that Chinese Christianity was, from the 1980s until the 1990s, predominately rural based, is now shifting to urban centres.

This paper will first take a look at the general difference between the urban and rural Christian communities, followed by the diversity of different urban strata, and concluding with pastoral reflections on current innovations with implications for the future. This article is primarily based on the ecclesial experience of the Protestant communities, and is specified as such in the article. Some experiences may perhaps be also relevant to the Chinese Catholic community, referred to

simply as Christian, as both Christian communities live in a similar social context sharing comparable core values.

Differences between Rural and Urban Christian Communities in China¹

The rural and urban living contexts are very different in China; such differences affect the ecclesial mode of the pastoral ministry in a Christian community. First, the urban population is usually better educated than the rural population as education facilities, both in terms of quality and quantity, are concentrated in the urban areas. Since the state officially endorses atheism, those who have received more formal education such as those in urban areas are less likely to have had a religious influence, especially from the folk religion popular among the less educated peasants. As the bulk of the new urban converts are intellectuals and skilled workers, they have to transfer their ideological allegiance from Atheism to Christianity. Thus, the main competing ideological organizations against the Church are the Communist Party and the Communist Youth League. Consequently, the growth of Christianity in urban areas poses a direct socio-political threat to the ruling Party and generates fears among the Party leadership. The Party responds to this threat by imposing various administrative measures targeting the growth of Christianity, such as

1 The thesis of this section is taken from this writer's book *Understanding World Christianity: China* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019), 116-122.

reluctance to grant permits to Christian groups to exist legally; the denial of applications for more services or religious activities to the registered groups; limitation of foreign contacts with these groups; removal of religious symbols from public view such as the Cross on the church buildings, and bans on religious propagation in public space, such as education institutes, hospitals, parks, shopping malls and even internet virtual space, easily accessed by the urban population. As a result, Christian communities in urban areas face stronger administrative constraints than their rural brethren, and pastors in urban areas have to deal with many more government obstacles than their rural counterparts do.

Second, for those who live in urban areas, faith issues are often more intellectual than pragmatic in nature. The Marxist scientific worldview, from which many of these urban converts come, does not make for an easy ideological transition to Christianity. The existence of God and faith, intangible subjects such as soul and Heaven, are often hotly debated topics among new believers and seekers. Many urban converts make an individual decision after a lengthy intellectual struggle. The evangelistic approach to urban people often relies more on apologetics than on the powerful spiritual encounters often seen in rural areas. Such an apologetic approach to Christianity among urban believers is evidenced by the popularity of Reform Theology, a highly rational set of theological doctrine established by the Swiss lawyer John Calvin several hundred years ago. While the rural Protestant community experienced a sudden outburst of

growth during the 1980s and 1990s, as miracles helped draw in a large group of followers, urban Protestantism grows steadily, tagging alongside the general growth of the urban population. Urban pastors have to be intellectually equipped with Christian apologetics in order to lead their parishioners. Catholic priests in urban parishes also face similar challenges as their parishioners are often from the intelligentsia.

Third, urban areas in China are densely populated and real estate is at a premium. Usually only the historical churches built before 1949 would own a piece of land in the city, and they have mostly registered with the government. These historical churches are able to rebuild a church on the same real estate they owned in the city. However, the government often takes over church property usually located in the centre of a city because of its prime commercial real estate value, and in return gives the church a larger piece of land on the outskirts of the city or in a new urban zone. In some instances, the government sells the church a piece of land in newly developed urban zones so that a new church can be built; however, the government still tightly controls the number of churches and church buildings. Even with initiatives for some new church buildings in new urban zones, the number of urban churches is far from sufficient to cater for the increasing numbers of the urban Christian population. The churches in the cities are often overflowing, yet this phenomenon reflects more the severe lack of pew space in the face of the huge Christian population than the seemingly strong piety of Chinese Christians. With church

buildings in the urban landscape few and far between, and with ever-expanding city zones rendering intra-city travel a time-consuming effort, many church activities are forced to be conducted in home gatherings of groups of believers living in close proximity to one another. Some churches even rent offices or flats to conduct their pastoral services. This type of situation is typical for officially registered churches in any major city demanding pastoral staffs to administer pastoral services in satellite gathering points all over the sprawling urban zone than just to provide services from the main Church building. The rural situation is different, as land is easily available and local village authorities easily approve most building constructions. Also, the depopulation of rural areas has created many empty pews in rural churches. Catholics experience similar ecclesial venue issues as the Protestants, yet in a lesser degree due to the slower growth rate.

Fourth, the Autonomous Christian Communities (ACC, also known as non-registered churches or family churches) may not have a church building simply because they are not registered. In the past, they could usually meet in homes or apartments. Now, with the increasing number of urban believers, most urban ACCs have to rent apartments, office buildings, or even hotel conference halls, factories, warehouses, and convention centres to hold their meetings. The government used to exhibit a high degree of tolerance for these groups, so long as neighbours do not complain, at least until 2017. As a new set of religious regulations has

been in effect since February 2018, there are increasing reports of urban ACC meetings being closed down. The authorities often justify such closures under the pretext of fire regulations, illegal usage, or rental disputes, rather than religious reasons. Most urban ACCs have been forced to re-group into smaller groups gathering in believers' households, and pastoral services are more demanding due to the decentralization of believers. As for rural ACCs, since the typical village house courtyard is quite spacious and can easily hold several dozens of people, they do not have too many difficulties conducting their activities without a formal church building.

Fifth, there is a higher socioeconomic cost for urban converts than for rural converts. The rural population, believers or otherwise, mostly earn their living by farming. Except for the few village cadres,² who are usually Party members whose income comes from the government, the religious affiliation of ordinary peasants does not normally affect their income, which is mostly from farm production. However, an urban convert's abandonment of atheism, although a religious decision, may have political implications. For example, if he or she is a Party member, or employed by the state in education, banking, health care systems, government services or other state employment such as in a State Owned Enterprise, he or she has to hide this

2 Cadres are Government officials and almost all Chinese civil servants are Party members.

religious conviction or face discrimination, demotion, and perhaps even dismissal from employment. Party members must recant religious faith or lose their membership, which carries with it the loss of Government employment and the privileges of being a Party member. For a person with senior government, military or Party position, the consequences of choosing Christianity may not just be personal but also affect the whole unit under his or her supervision. This writer knows of a senior ranking Commander in the PLA Navy who is a believer. He cannot become a formal Christian by baptism as such an act would not only cost him his job, but also many of the subordinates under his fleet command would suffer negative consequences. He is, ecclesiastically speaking, not a Christian as he has not undergone the initiation rite of baptism; however, he is a follower of Jesus. There are many such followers among the intellectuals, or working in government service, the military, the police force (security apparatus) and the Party, who are not part of the visible Christian (both Protestant and Catholic) communities, especially in urban areas, but remain part of the mystical body of Christ. These individuals are frequently referred to as 'cultural Christians,' 'hidden Christians,' or 'anonymous Christians,' and need to be ministered to in a rather clandestine manner. Whereas in the rural areas the religious affiliation of the peasants does not usually carry socio-economic consequences, other than the occasional docking of elderly social welfare subsidy allowances by local village cadres, should the allowance recipients not recant their Christian faith.

Sixth, China's cities are much more accessible to foreigners and foreign influences than the rural areas. Along with foreign influences, various foreign ecclesial cultures have also entered urban areas through foreign Christians, who have taken up residence there. In recent years, the Korean style of prayer, Singaporean Charismatic songs and worship styles, Taiwanese praise group dances, US Vineyard songs, Australian Hillsong hymns, or even Taize chanting, are rather popular in both the officially registered and ACC urban communities simply because of the easy access to these worship modes introduced by foreign missionaries who easily get permission to reside in the cities under various guises. In addition, educated urban Chinese Protestants can readily absorb these new styles for they tend to be more open to new ideas and have foreign language skills that their rural counterparts usually lack. As a result, one can easily find many contemporary worship styles in China's urban Protestant communities against the rather monotonous services in rural churches. Urban pastors are also expected to lead or at least to catch up with such trends.

Seventh, there is a type of ecclesial group found mostly in urban areas in China: business peoples fellowships. As China has adopted the Reform and Open Policy since 1980, there has been a gradual emergence of a business class, which exists predominately in urban areas where most business activities take place. Business people in China enjoy a rather prestigious and powerful social status, and more and more people are joining their ranks. Business people are

increasingly being invited to join the ranks of the political elite, such as becoming deputies of the People's Congress or members of the People's Political Consultative Conference. Some are even invited to join the Chinese Communist Party. One may wonder how Karl Marx might react if he was living in China now, hearing that business people, the capitalists, are invited to join the Chinese Communist Party. Who then would fight for the right of the workers and the proletariats exploited by the Capitalist Party members!

At the same time, there are increasing numbers of Chinese business people embracing the Christian faith, mostly due to the witness of fellow Christian business colleagues, especially from expatriate business partners from Hong Kong, Taiwan and overseas Chinese Christians. Because of the status and growth of business in China, usually local officials turn a blind eye to these Christian fellowships as long as they do not challenge the government's authority. The Full Gospel Business Fellowship has already established many chapters in China. These believers often do not attend church services on Sundays because they are travelling, attending to their growing business enterprises spreading all over the country and overseas. Also, many seem to find the Sunday sermons preached in their local churches irrelevant to their daily lives.³ Most resort to their

3 A Christian business lady told me that one Sunday she heard the preacher denouncing money as the source of all evil and earning money means loving the world, not God. She felt even more disgusted after the service when the preacher asked her to donate money for the church building fund because she was wealthy.

own fellowships, often held in hotel halls, private clubs, or exclusive dining rooms in fancy restaurants under various pretexts such as gourmet fine dining, wine tasting or birthday parties. Many of them are not baptized and, theologically speaking, are not church members. Their gatherings are not part of any church (although some of them may be affiliated with a church) and there are no sacraments. This kind of ecclesial community is common in urban China and is part of the Chinese Protestant landscape. Often pastors from urban churches are asked to chaplain these business Christians out of regular church service hours and in non ecclesial venues, whereas rural pastors may not need to face such ministerial tasks.

Diverse Urban Strata and Christian Communities

The current 900 million urban population comes from a diverse socio-economic background and from a wide range of the income spectrum, from the rich entrepreneur owning private jets to middle class professionals who can afford overseas travel to poor migrant workers living from hand to mouth. There is no typical profile for the Chinese urban population other than that they are living in the areas designated as urban with their main economic productivity being non-agricultural. They usually have access to typical urban amenities such as concentrated goods and services along with paved roads, clean water, electricity and public sanitation. With the escalations in the urban population, there are increasing numbers of urban subgroups which congregate by economic conditions, as well as their link with the city

where they are now living. I attempt to categorize them into the following four groups, groups that contain a reasonable presence of a Christian population with relevancy to pastoral ministry: Traditional Urban Dwellers, New Urban Residents, Urban Migrants, and the “Low-end Population.”

Traditional Urban Dwellers

In most major cities, there are always a core group of local residents who are proud of their urban heritage which may stretch back for many generations, such as those who call themselves old Pekingese or Shanghaiese. They and their family members all have urban residency. Before the 1980s when the urbanization process began, there was little population migration and these local residents developed their own cultural identity shaping the unique cultural flavour of the cities that they have been living in for generations. As this population group has been well established in the city, benefiting from the good education facilities and various personal connections to the plum positions, they have been the political and intellectual elites of the country. Therefore, they usually hold relatively stable jobs, such as government officials, owners of local shops, intellectuals, managers, professionals, and retirees. Many of the traditional urban churches used to be filled by Christians from such local urban populations, who may have embraced Christianity for a few generations with strong ties to the Church as well as having inter-congregational ties. It was these urban Christians who had preserved the Christian faith

during the times of suppression, and re-kindled it once the churches were reopened in the late 1970s. They have usually passed on their faith through their family networks to the next generation and these descendents are often the pillars of the local congregations. Currently most of the senior pastors of the provincial Christian councils come from such backgrounds. Because of the historical ties, these urban dwelling Christians often preserve their traditional liturgy, depending on their denominational background, and favour local dialects including dialect hymnody, such as the Minnan (Dialect) Hymnody favoured in Xiamen.

However due to the rapid expansion of the urban zone, most of the inner cities have since been developed as tourist, commercial or financial centres, and local residents are relocated to suburban districts rendering travel to churches in the inner city a hassle. Often these inner-city churches, except a few historical ones, are also relocated and rebuilt in suburban areas, which draw many new comers who may have little connection or identity with the past of this city, effectively diluting these traditional or local urban Christian populations. However, it is these traditional urban Christians who provide distinctive ecclesial characteristics, unique to each region, that ties with the historical traditions of Christianity in each locality. For example, churches in Swatow (Shantou), Guangdong, hold special thanksgiving services on Chinese New Year's day, or the Churches in Shanghai favour high church liturgy, and the Churches in Shenyang hold Thanksgiving services in Autumn – all

are legacies from the missionaries' time. These Christian heritages are gradually changing as the older generations are passing away and the younger generations are more open to new ideas with many fewer historical ties. The influx of Christians with roots from elsewhere bring in different ecclesial elements to develop new forms of ecclesial expressions, just like the evolving of many new metropolises in China, rooted in the traditional character of that city yet transcending beyond the original cultural characteristics in a new amalgamated form of urban habitation. Pastors in these urban cities have to manage these Christian legacies of the city, as well as to navigate through the complex relations among Christian clanships and families as these clans or families are still very influential in ecclesial affairs. Also, they have to bridge the traditional urban groups with the newly arrived groups to develop an inclusive ecclesial mode rooted in the past yet open to the future, a challenging task for most urban pastors in China.

New Urban Residents

In the past it was very difficult for the rural population to obtain the coveted urban residency status as such a status can ensure access to many superior urban services, such as education and health care. With the rapid urbanization program, there has been an urgent need to draw large numbers of the rural population to build up the urban areas, be it skilled labour or otherwise. As the urban population grew from 150 million in the 1980s to the current 900

million, a six-fold increase, the total population only grew 60 percent. There was the transformation of at least 600 million from the rural population into the urban ranks under various forms of residency – ranging from full urban residential right for those who bought property or fulfilled specific qualifications to tacit approval with no access to social services allowing them to stay in an urban limbo state – in order to retain these rural migrants to build the expanding metropolis. A good portion of them is students from rural areas, who attend high schools, vocational colleges and universities found in the cities, and they remain in the cities when they get a job after graduation, a condition that usually fulfils the requirement for urban residency. They have already experienced urban life while studying in the city; by the time they get a job in the city they are usually well accustomed to the urban environment. In fact, many of them find it more uncomfortable to go back to their rural villages. These new populations are mostly young, educated, sophisticated, single, and optimistic. They eventually root themselves in urban dwellings and identify themselves as urbanites. Most of them become officials or professionals; they join the swelling ranks of the middle class. The first generation may still have some ties to their rural homeland and may even bring their parents or relatives to settle in their new urban dwellings. For those who have settled down to raise a family, their children would have few ties with the homeland of their parents, other than the occasional visits to their grandparents or to patronize restaurants favouring their parents' nostalgic home town cuisine. These new

city dwellers probably form the bulk of the new urban population, as is evident in the city of Shenzhen, where the original Shenzhen residents constituted less than half a million among a current population of 12.5 million. The bulk of the Shenzhen population comes from all over the country consisting of all kinds of skilled labourers needed to develop this mega city from a village into the present hi-tech, financial hub of southern China.

The Christians among the new urban residents also come from a variety of ecclesial backgrounds. A large number of them encountered the Christian faith while on campus, and have joined various fellowship groups from registered churches or the ACCs. As they settle in the city after graduation, they move beyond the campus fellowships into different kinds of ecclesial groups. Some of them may even start their own ACCs. These types of Christians contribute to the emergence of many new urban churches,⁴ almost all of which are ACCs, attracting intellectuals and professionals. Some may have already embraced Christianity while they were in the rural areas, and brought their faith with them. They may gather their Christian clansmen from their own regions and establish their own ecclesial groups modelled after their home church – a sort of Christian clansmen's club or self-help group in a foreign place. A typical example is Wenzhouese churches in every major city operated by Christians from Wenzhou, who speak a

4 Chan, *Understanding World Christianity: China*, 93-94.

particular dialect incomprehensible to most other Chinese. They will typically hold a love feast after Sunday services with dishes of Wenzhou delicacies.

Other than those clansmen churches which are a closed ecclesial community with pastoral self-sufficiency, the majority of the ecclesial groups of new urban residents face many pastoral challenges similar to urban churches elsewhere. First, these middle-class urbanites are mostly new settlers in the city and the church would become their most trusted community that can bond them together through similar faith values. There would be an unconscious expectancy that their pastors become surrogate community leaders beyond just being spiritual guides. The pastoral duties may often include social services for new settlers: from being a real estate agent to providing employment information, and marriage mediator to match maker! Second, as many of these Christians work in various fields in professional and commercial areas in a rapidly growing society operating 24/7, many of these Christians are required to work on weekends, as well as take frequent and unscheduled business trips. Many cannot attend regular church services and activities. It is an increasing challenge for pastors in Chinese cities to minister to these mobile Christians. But it does provide an opportunity to develop innovative pastoral tools such as internet chat rooms, online services, virtual meetings, and so on. Third, these new urban Christians are mostly from educated backgrounds in various disciplines – medical to legal to science, and their quest for faith would

be both pragmatic and rational. Urban pastors have to handle many theological questions from these educated Christians who cannot be satisfied with just some simple answers usually acceptable to believers from the rural areas. Most of the pastors from the registered churches are at the bachelor's level in their theological training, and only a few are at the graduate level. On the other hand, quite a large number of the pastors from the ACCs obtained a master's level, or above, in their theological education, and quite a few have been educated overseas, with advanced theological training; hence ACCs seem to be more attractive to these Christians than the registered churches. It seems that urban pastors feel great pressure to continue educating themselves in order to minister to those increasingly educated congregation members.

Rural Migrants

Besides the millions of professionals who fill offices in the skyscrapers, shop and dine in glamorous shopping malls, drive late model sedans on newly paved highways, and live in brand new high-rise apartments or in suburban villas, there are millions almost invisible labourers who keep these cities running smoothly. They are the office cleaners, sales ladies, waiters, cooks, delivery men, taxi drivers, gas station attendants, convenience store keepers, plumbers, security guards, massagers, assembly line workers, etc. Most of the traditional and new urbanites would not take up these jobs. These jobs in service and low skill manufacture sectors attract the semi to unskilled labour pool from the rural areas.

Since the 1990s, these rural labourers flocked to the urban areas looking for such jobs, which pay more than they could earn working on the farm. Some would bring their families and raise them there. Those who came earlier would have settled down in the urban areas. However, many of them lack proper urban residency, except perhaps a few who might be rich enough, such as business entrepreneurs, to pay or bribe for their urban residency. Many privately run schools and clinics, all illegal, are serving these communities. Such migrants and their children cannot have access to urban social services. Despite their ambiguous resident status, they are an indispensable part of the urban machinery that keeps the city running. Therefore, their presence is needed, tolerated and to a certain extent, their legal status is deliberately unregulated. Although the Government has begun a *hukou* reform program since 2014, and it is still going on in various regions, the results are mixed. This is because migrants in the more desirable cities such as Beijing or Shanghai still find it extremely difficult to gain residency as local governments impose many extra local conditions to limit this coveted status, whereas the less desirable cities especially those in interior regions are much more receptive to attract skilled labours with their urban development programs.

These rural migrants usually come from regions with a heavy population of peasants, such as Henan or Anhui, where there have been a large population of Christians. A typical example is the Zhoukou city in Henan which has a population of about 10 million, of which more than 10

percent are Christians. Among these 1 million Christians, more than 60 percent, almost all the able-bodied working age peasants, ranging from 16 to 45 years of age, have left the farm to work in the urban areas. Most of these 600,000 migrant workers would congregate together with their kinsmen in various urban locations where unskilled labourers are in demand. They usually form their own small Christian gatherings, which also serve as a type of Zhoukou Christian mutual support unit. They link up with similar Zhoukou Christian groups elsewhere to form a loose network to exchange information and tips on migrant livelihood. These rural migrant Christian groups are found everywhere, and are only known by their fellow kinsmen as they usually congregate in a close-knit network. Some of these rural migrant Christians may occasionally join the local registered church or ACCs, and many feel they do not fit in these congregations due to a difference of socio-economic background. One can imagine how a peasant urban migrant Christian would feel in an urban ACC, where most of the members are university-educated professionals with a few professors among them debating the merits of Calvinistic doctrine. Also practically speaking, most of the jobs that these rural migrants take up demand long working hours and over-time, which give them very little opportunity to attend the regular services in registered churches. If they do, the occasions they attend would be few and far between. This is a group of Christians that often lack pastoral services as it would demand pastors who can speak their dialect, can travel

and migrate with them, can provide comprehensive spiritual-social care for their needs, and offer services at irregular hours. It is more a chaplaincy service at a clansman drop-in centre for rural migrants, than a parish or a congregation based pastoral care centre – be it registered or an ACC group. It is a form of pastoral care that at this stage the Church in China can ill afford but hopefully would be able to provide in the days to come.

“Low-end Population”

This is a term used in Mainland media and government policy papers from 2010 to 2017 when the Beijing government forcefully evicted these low skilled and low value-added workers causing a national outcry to ban this discriminatory term, but not the eviction orders that resulted in tens of thousands migrant workers in Beijing losing their homes (or shed), possessions, jobs, and the right to live in their city.⁵ Since then the government has banned the public usage of this term, considering it discriminatory.⁶ In any city, there would always be a stratum of population who live at the bottom of the urban economic food chain as part of the urban reality. They are the garbage collectors, seasonal workers, part-time cleaners or nannies, gardeners, part-time

5 Gabriele Battaglia, “Beijing Migrant Worker Evictions: the Four-Character Word You Can’t Say Anymore,” *South China Morning Post*, December 3, 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/2122496/beijing-migrant-worker-evictions-four-character-word-you-cant-say>.

6 This writer will still employ this term in this paper, without any discriminatory intention, to denote such category of population.

workers, painters, movers, and so on. They are different from the rural migrant groups mentioned above, which are usually characterised by their holding of some permanent or full-time job, running a small business, residing in some permanent housing, already having a family in the city, with stronger identity ties with the city than the rural home village, and already having or in the process of having official urban residency. These “low-end population” people are rural migrants who usually have no permanent job, constantly look for various employment opportunities usually at the bottom of the economic ladder, living in crowded illegal dwellings. These people live in a limbo zone as many cities consider this population undesirable, providing them with no social services or legal protection. Yet this population provides vital services filling many labour gaps that other urban groups are unwilling to fill. They are tolerated by, unwelcomed by and segregated from other urban groups. This marginalized “low-end population” has been, and will be a permanent fixture of any urban scene; their fate is at the mercy of the authorities and dependent upon the local political climate. There are of course Christians in such a population, but these Christians would have a hard time participating in regular parish-based pastoral services, be it in terms of time, geography or social interactions. As most of them are struggling for survival trying to save some money to send back to their rural hometown, their needs are socio-economic rather than spiritual, and any pastoral care would be leaning more towards physical rather than religious needs.

This writer had encounters with groups of Christians from the “low-end population” from Guizhou living in Kunming. There are all garbage collectors, as well as garbage sorters, looking for any recyclable goods. Their dwellings are similar to many slums in major Asian cities with little public sanitation. They have no government-subsidized medical service (only available to urban residents), and they can hardly afford an expensive medical bill, should they become ill and need to use a government medical facility. Many of them fall ill due to long-term and intensive exposure to all sorts of garbage, from rotten restaurant left overs, to septic needles from clinics. Many of them also take odd jobs such as temporary cooks, movers, cleaners, and so on. This writer naively asked them if they have any worship services or Bible study group. They were rather puzzled at this enquiry and told me that they were too tired with basic household chores such as cooking and washing after their typical 14-hour work day to attend any religious meeting. Also, they still have to collect garbage on Sundays as people would not stop disposing of garbage on Sundays. Instead Sunday is usually a heavy day especially from the many restaurants, eateries, markets and shops that dispose of their garbage on that day!

Their main concern is not to get sick or else they would lose days of work as well as income, plus incur extra medical expenses. Some take their children along as there are no caretakers at home. These kids cannot attend local and cheap government schools. Instead they have to attend those privately operated and illegal schools set up near their

colony. Another main concern for them is the care of these kids after school while their parents are still out collecting garbage or other works. Some kids are said to have lost their lives when they fell off from some fences or drowned in nearby sewage ditches while their parents were out working. What they needed, and asked for, were some social resources that they could use, basic legal knowledge such as labour rights, care for their kids after school, and affordable medical services. In other words, they need more basic social services than religious services. This writer further asked them if they ever had a pastor visit them before, and he found out that he was the first one. People may easily overlook the existence of such a group while enjoying the services provided by the group. They are often a transparent group in our urban centres, be it in China or elsewhere, the Little Ones that deserve much ecclesial attention should the Church follow the teaching of the preferential option for the poor.

Pastoral Reflection

Urban populations in China are similar to other urban populations elsewhere in the world, composed of many different diverse groups, from the economically extremely rich to the desperately impoverished, from politically powerful elites to powerless masses living on the fringes, and from culturally highly educated to illiterates. There is no typical urban profile other than the often misleading stereotype of a middle class urban young couple with a comfortable income, a car, perhaps a child, an apartment, and

maybe also a pet. Such a stereotype population is but one of the many groups co-existing in urban areas. Urban ecclesial communities, too, include Christians from a wide range of backgrounds, from a business tycoon to a garbage collector, from a professor to an illiterate granny, all are supposed to be equal in the pew and can share the same communion from the very same Altar. After all, Christianity preaches a religion where the Gospel is a socio-economic equalizer and all are equal before the Divine, be they proletarian or aristocratic. The classification of population from the ecclesial perspective should be theological, not social, racial, cultural or political in nature. The Christian population should be categorized according to their relationship with the Christian faith, such as non-believers, catechumens, believers, apostates, heretics, and ministers, etc.

However, in the pastoral context, urban pastoral care in China is usually organized less from a theological basis than on practical grounds, such as temporal, spatial and geographical considerations. Currently, most of the pastoral services in China are venue-centred, such as worship, preaching, Eucharist, Sunday school, and so on. For example, the current venue-centred religious services concentrate on weekends and evenings, which would be suitable for those who have a steady job with a regular weekday working schedule. It has been the general ecclesial mode, especially in China, where the ratio of congregation members to clergy is very high (usually several hundreds to one in urban areas) for religious services in the venue-centered

mode to maximize pastoral coverage with limited pastoral resources. However, such a mode of ecclesial services would preclude the participation of many groups and deny them having a normal ecclesial life. Such groups would include those in the service industry, including medical, transport, international trade, logistics, markets, shopping, catering, security, entertainment, and shop owners, who have to work outside of the weekday office hours, need to be on shifts 24/7 to keep services in a modern city running. They are the underserved group denied ecclesial Grace. Perhaps they consider themselves as sinners for living in an urban pattern not compatible with the current ecclesial service schedule.

Also as urban regions keep expanding to suburban areas hitherto having low populations and few religious venues, the traditional ecclesial venues in urban centres are insufficient to cater to the increasing population as well as to the influx of people living away from the urban centres. In fact all the major urban areas in China lack sufficient ecclesial venues, especially in light of the government's reluctance to grant land to build churches. Even if new churches are built, they are often few and far between, causing many believers to spend a long time in intra city travelling, or in traffic jams, which is a common phenomenon in all growing urban centres. Many urban Christians simply can ill afford to spare a long time in order to attend church activities in their busy urban life, or they would simply attend only on special occasions. Gradually, these Christian groups may drift away from the venue-centered church life. These venue-

centered ecclesial activities gradually become dominated by some urban groups whose members are likely from the professional middle class having a weekday work schedule, and living not too far away from the church. This group would become the majority of the active congregation members and would self-perpetuate and define an ecclesial mode. This results in a stereotypical urban Christian profile that unconsciously excludes other urban groups, be they economically, culturally, geographically or temporally different from this group, groups such as the “low-end population”, rural migrants, and perhaps even some new urban residents, like those mentioned above.

The aforementioned urban Christian situation is found not only in China but is also a global reality wherever urbanization is taking place. China’s situation is accentuated because of the rapid pace of urbanization, the government’s hostility towards Christianity and its policy to limit Christianity’s growth, as well as the shortage of pastors in face of the rapid growth of the Christian population. One may question the traditional mode of pastoral service, which dates back to the pre-modern era, whether it can still satisfy the pastoral needs of urban Christians, be they in China or in postmodern urban setting elsewhere, where many different social-economic groups co-exist in parallel realms with a few overlapping life styles. There are many new forms of ecclesial responses emerging in China and elsewhere, which may establish new pastoral paradigms complementing the traditional venue-centered pastoral service.

Virtual Ecclesial Community

Since 2018, there has been a rapid clampdown on the non-registered Christian establishments in China, including churches, seminaries, Christian schools, and Christian related enterprises, such as coffee shops and book stores which are often used for small group gatherings. Some of these groups continued their ministries in virtual space and have even expanded their followers beyond their geographic location. In fact online religious services have been available for years in most countries and particularly have been utilized by mega churches connecting to followers who live in different countries.⁷ The Covid-19 global pandemic outbreak which caused all public gatherings to be discouraged, if not prohibited, has speeded up the use of virtual ecclesial space, as it may often be the only viable means to connect with believers in a self-isolated locked-down society. Some ecclesial communities are doing virtually all religious services in virtual or hybrid virtual format: from worship services, preaching, prayer, counselling, ordinations, holy communion, choir, Sunday school, cell groups, to even weddings.⁸ Some seminaries are still operating online via

7 For example, one of the mega churches in Singapore draws more online followers than the attendants in its worship services held at a church venue, see Kim-kwong Chan, “City Harvest Church: An Ecclesial Paradigm of Pentecostalism in the Postmodern World,” in Fenggang Yang, Joy K.C. Tong and Allan H. Anderson, ed., *Global Chinese Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 286-308.

8 This writer has participated, and officiated, in most of these ecclesial activities. However, there is yet to be a virtual baptism, at least this writer has not heard of it.

programs such as Zoom, just like most of the education institutions giving classes during virus lockdown. There are, of course many theological issues depending on the particular denominational stance, such as the validity of sacraments. However, pastoral needs often stretch the theological boundaries to accommodate, or even justify, such new practices. After all, the basic pastoral question since Biblical times is whether Sabbath is made for humanity or humanity is created for the Sabbath. The merit of virtual religious services is that they transcend temporal, geographic and spatial dimensions to meet the growing religious needs of our society, with populations fragmented into different temporal, spatial and geographic realities. Such new means of pastoral ministry may become a new pastoral normalcy complementing the venue-based mode, especially in China where the internet penetration rate is one of the highest in the world. However, the drawbacks are both the Chinese government's monitoring and interference in of all forms of communication, so that dissenting netizens have to constantly try to outsmart the government's internet censors, and the lack of physical connections, which render socio-spiritual concrete support to groups like the "low-end population" impossible. This digitalized pastoral realm is also highlighted in the Vatican's new pastoral guideline.⁹ It seems that Christians in China, like all other Christians in the world, are making new adjustment in pastoral ministry vis-a-vis our new virtual reality.

9 The Congregation of the Clergy, "The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelising Mission of the Church," July 20, 2020.

Chaplaincy Services

Chaplaincy services have been a pastoral norm in the West, where particular groups of the population would need special pastoral care, that cannot be provided by normal ecclesial services. There are chaplaincy services in airports for the transient population,¹⁰ in universities for the student population, in military forces for military personnel, particularly during their deployments, in hospitals when believers are facing a particular crisis, as well as in locations geographically far away from their normal ecclesial venues, like for police or fire brigades, for those in trauma, in refugee camps, in prison for inmates, on cruise ships for the passengers, on streets for the homeless or drug addicts, in business people fellowships, and even in some corporations for in-house believers. Commonalities among these specific groups are that they are both homogenous in nature and with particular pastoral needs that are not commonly found among the general population. They may be living a mobile life with an irregular schedule, facing certain life-threatening challenges, going through a special transient phase in their lives, or looking for particular help to remedy their living situations. Many of the particular urban groups in China may fall into such categories, such as those among the “low-end population”.

10 Hong Kong International Airport has Inter-faith Chaplaincy service under the Hong Kong Airport Authority. This writer happens to serve as an Airport Chaplain during the past 20 years.

Chaplaincy service in China is like a high-wire act because such services often challenge the political *status quo* of the authorities, as many potential beneficiaries have in fact suffered from various kinds of deprivation of their human rights, a responsibility which the civil authority should bear yet fail to remedy. Some are simple victims of failed government policies or victimized by corrupt and incompetent authorities. Such chaplaincy services would stress social justice; therefore, these chaplaincy services may inevitably expose the dark side of society leading to the public humiliation of authorities. Consequently, chaplaincy services in China often operate at the fringe, underneath the government's costs and media's radar, so as not to invoke the wrath of the civil authority. Despite such social costs, some ecclesial communities are heading in the direction of this chaplaincy orientation as a special ecclesial mission. For example, some Urban ACCs, especially those with many professionals and resources, have been sending teams of pastoral workers to minister to underprivileged groups especially to those migrant population groups living at the bottom of the economic food chain. They provide tutorial service for those migrant kids, and some even run schools, or provide a clinic for them. Many registered churches, too, are also engaged in such chaplaincy services, e.g. a registered church in Xishuang Banna, Yunnan, has designated pastoral teams to provide chaplaincy, medical, and social services for the sex workers, drug addicts and also for leprosy communities. However, such chaplaincy services are expensive to operate,

both in human, material, and financial terms, so much so that few urban churches in China can afford it.

Ecclesial Small Groups

Many urban churches, both ACCs and registered churches, experiment with various forms of small groups which are known under different names such as, cell group, discipleship group, Bible study groups, evangelistic Bible group, or groups under different programs or trade names. They are small Christian groups meeting at home mainly to run Bible studies, prayer, worship and mutual supportive fellowships. The main objectives of these groups are Christian formation, fellowship and evangelism. They are usually led by trained laity or pastors; they are connected with and supported by ACC or venue-based congregations as a form of pastoral outreach into the concrete reality of the believers. Often small group activities become the main ecclesial participation of many urban Christians in China. Attending Church services at the congregation or parish level is of secondary importance, or only occasional, for sacramental needs. Ecclesial Small Groups are now becoming the main pastoral form of religious practice in many urban congregations, as these small groups are flexible in temporal, socio-cultural, geographic and spatial aspects. These groups can tap into the concrete needs of individuals as they take place *in situ* where the small group members can share their aspirations among themselves. They support each other physically, emotionally and spiritually. Such ecclesial

organic structures have roots in the Chinese Protestant tradition, such as the Jesus Family or the Spiritual Bands¹¹ dating back to almost a century ago. They have since evolved into similar ecclesial modes often in forms of the Family Church to preserve their Christian faith during governmental suppression of Christianity for almost two decades, during the Cultural Revolution in the 60s and 70s. Such an ecclesial tradition is still deeply rooted in the psyche of Chinese Christians as the ideal spiritual model for ecclesial living.

If one traces the Ecclesial Small Group in contemporary church history, they will discover the Catholic Bokor Movement in Hungary, a small Christian Group resisting Communist oppression. Later Morris West also envisioned such small ecclesial groups as a viable form of ecclesial existence in an apocalyptic world.¹² The liberation theologians popularized the *comunidades de base* (Base Community) in Latin America – a similar form of ecclesial small group – in the 1970s to 1980s as part of the pastoral expression of Liberation Theology with emphasis on the preferential option for the poor. Many Evangelistic groups in the 1960s to 1980s have often used ecclesial small groups as forms of discipleship training in campus ministry or for the military chaplaincy, such as the Campus Crusade for Christ or the Navigators. Many mega churches, especially those Charismatic ones in the 1990s until recent times,

11 See Chan, *Understanding World Christianity: China*, 77-85.

12 Morris West, *The Shoes of the Fisherman* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963).

used ecclesial small groups as one of the most vital pastoral networks to conduct their pastoral ministry. Perhaps ecclesial small groups will re-emerge, along with the virtual ecclesial community and chaplaincy services, into the spot light of pastoral ministry in our post-modern and deconstructed urban society, both in urban China and other urban regions in the world.