

**The Church as Servant, a *Diakonic* Community:  
The Chin Immigrant Ecclesiology in the US**

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**Introduction**

This paper is a product of my doctoral research among the Chin immigrant churches in the US who have been in constant struggle in order to fit in to this new land. The church, in this case, has become a center for a social network that provides the help its members need. Hence, Chin immigrant churches have functioned as *reception centers* for families seeking support from government agencies and non-government organizations. Viewed from this aspect, the church is truly a servant; it is a *diakonic community* that provides social cares for its members. In this paper, the term *diakonia* is used in its narrow sense, meaning *service*—which a believer as well as the church is called to render. Hence, *diakonia* is one of the essential expressions of the church; it is closely related to following the example of Jesus Christ, who appeared among the disciples as one who serves (Luke 22:27; Matthew 20:26). First, this paper engages the concept of *diakonia* from a biblical and theological perspectives. Second, a Chin immigrant ecclesiology for social ministry is proposed.

**The Concept of Church: Biblical and Theological Perspectives**

The biblical narrative that describes the concept of the church as servant is the account of Jesus and his two disciples, James and John—the sons of Zebedee. In this account, Jesus taught the two brothers as well as the other disciples the meaning of being disciples (Mark 10:43-45; cf. Matthew 20:20-28). He said:

But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came *not to be served but to serve*, and to give his life a ransom for many.

A similar narrative may be found in the Johannine account of the foot washing of Jesus to his disciples (John 13:4f). In fact, the whole ministry and life of Jesus can be described simply as service. In this regard, Hans Küng observes, “Service is the imitation of Christ.”<sup>1</sup> The word service is in Greek “*diakonia*, meaning an activity which every Greek would recognize at once as being one of self-abasement: waiting at table, serving food and pouring wine.”<sup>2</sup>

The term *diakonia* is one of the most important New Testament terms applied to the church. It applies to “all types of ministry—including the ministry of the word, of sacraments, and of temporal help.”<sup>3</sup> It is important, however, to remind oneself that being in the *diakonia*—in God’s ministry—is not primarily a career. Rather, it is a calling. The disciples of Jesus were

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<sup>1</sup> Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967), 390.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Avery C. Dulles, *Models of the Church*. Expanded ed. (New York: Doubleday, 2002), 91-92.

called to follow him. For Paul, “the decision to enter the ministry was not a choice among professions, but a response to God’s summons on the Damascus road.”<sup>4</sup> Inherent to the nature of Christian calling is the understanding of servanthood, a concept that has a deep meaning of service (Philippians 2).

The Bible, especially the New Testament, is full of passages related to the concept of *diakonia*, service that is a reflection of the nature of the church. According to Küng, Jesus gave the notion of “service at the very heart of his eschatological message,” which can be seen in his final commandment “to love one’s neighbor, a love in which the love of God is manifested.”<sup>5</sup> For Jesus, the word *diakonia* becomes “an essential characteristic of discipleship” and is used in its “original sense of waiting at table—the servant waits on his master” (Luke 17:8).<sup>6</sup> Jesus is not merely concerned about service at table, or care for the physical needs of others (cf. Luke 8:3; Mark 15:41; Matthew 24:45). His fundamental concern is to live for others (cf. Mark 9:35; 10:43-45; Matthew 20:26-28).<sup>7</sup>

The church as a servant, a *diakonic* community is a called-out community that has a shared communal calling to a life of service for the sake of God’s world. Christians respond to God’s call through the waters of baptism and “embrace a common way of life—a life of discipleship in communion for mission. The call to discipleship is a personal, communal, and vocational reality.”<sup>8</sup> Being a disciple of Jesus is related to the *diakonia*, as Stevens rightly observes, which means offering “one’s life in the employ of the Lord even unto death.”<sup>9</sup> As he explains, ministry is not “an optional activity for the church, but rather part of its essence.”<sup>10</sup> Jesus told his disciples, “Whoever serves me must follow me, and where I am, there will my servant be also. Whoever serves me, the Father will honor” (John 12:25-26). This is evident from the calling of the disciples of Jesus (Matthew 10:1-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:12-16). Jesus taught and reminded them about the nature of being disciples as being salt and light of the world (Matthew 5:13-16). When Jesus called his disciples, he called them not to be lord over others, but to be humble servants for the benefit of others (Mark 9:33-35).

Taking the life and ministry of Jesus as a paradigm, it can be concluded that “ministry does not mean elevation over others but service to others—both spiritual and material.”<sup>11</sup> Jesus was sent by the Father in order to serve those in need. He was sent into the world as “one who serves” (Luke 22:27; John 13:13-15). The concept of service found in Jesus’ life is expressed through love. John describes Jesus as a good shepherd who loves his sheep so much that he lays down his life for them (John 10:11). The church as a diaconal community is called to reflect the love of God through its ministries. Reflecting on God’s love through different ministries is what Stevens calls “Christodiakonic community,” the people through whom “God continues to serve through Christ in the power and presence of the Spirit.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Donald E. Messer, *Contemporary Images of Christian Ministry* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1989), 68.

<sup>5</sup> Küng, *The Church*, 391.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen A. Cahalan, *Introducing the Practice of Ministry* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 27.

<sup>9</sup> R. Paul. Stevens, *The Other Six Days: Vocation, Work, and Ministry in Biblical Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999), 139.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Donald G. Bloesch, *The Church: Sacraments, Worship, Ministry, Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 206.

<sup>12</sup> Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 142.

The church as a Christodiakonic community is comprised of believers with God's special gifts and grace. In first Corinthians 12:4-31, Paul reminds us that the Spirit is given to each believer for the common good and for the benefit of others. In Ephesians 4:11-13, Paul again reminds us that the differing gifts are meant to prepare God's people for works of service and for the benefit of others (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:12-31). The church, being the body of Christ and being endowed with the gifts of the Spirit, is also a fellowship of different ministries.

In my research, most of the Chin churches tend to view the church as a servant in the sense that it is a *diakonic* community committed to providing the social care for its members. They also recognize the social teachings of Jesus and their practical implications. Hence, they are committed to providing the necessary social supports to their members. Hence, the church has literally become "a second family" for many of them.

Moreover, for Chin immigrant Christians, the church is the most formative and stable religious institution that helps to shape and maintain their ethnic and communal identity. The church for them, as Rah rightly describes, "becomes the heaven where their hearts' language is the language of norm."<sup>13</sup> Rah further posits that the immigrant church is "an important arena through which home language and culture are affirmed not only for the first generation but the succeeding generations as well."<sup>14</sup> This is true for the Chin immigrants in the U.S. as well. The church, for them, is not only an arena through which they nurture their spiritual life; it is also a place where they maintain their ethnic identity and homeland culture.

The challenge, however, is that many Chin believers tend to view the church as simply a service provider that supplies the needs of individual believers. Viewed this way, the church has become a social institution existing simply for the benefit of individuals. Then the focus of ministry tends to be on how the individual needs can be met by the church, rather than on how the congregation as a whole fulfill God's ultimate purpose for the world.

I assert that the church needs to be more than just a social service center and a social institution that exists for the benefit of its own members. Some Chin pastors have legitimate concerns regarding the concept of the church being a social service center. Pastor Micah lamented:

Often times we are like a church that looks for our own benefits. A book that I read reminds me of the church as a "club" in which we register as members, expecting the benefit the church can offer. Rather, we should be a church that takes "discipleship" very seriously. The church should not be for our family's benefit. Rather, it should be a called-out community that has a responsibility to do God's work in the world.<sup>15</sup>

There is nothing wrong about the church being a social service center. In fact, the church plays an essential role in helping many Chin refugee families in their life transitions and socio-economic adjustments in their new context. As much as this social institutional model is helpful, however, it tends to encourage members to be dependent too much on the church. It tends to encourage people to be passive participants, rather than being active participants in the life and ministry of the church. Hence, the following is a proposal of a Chin immigrant ecclesiology for social ministry.

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<sup>13</sup> Soong-Chan Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009), 168.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>15</sup> A journal note from my conversation with Pastor Micah at his office on October 20, 2012.

## A Chin Immigrant Ecclesiology for Social Ministry

The Chin immigrant churches appear to be influenced by the view that the church is a *diakonic* community in the sense that it is a social institution fully committed to serving its members. They are fully aware of how important it is to provide the necessary social services for their members. The church, in this case, tends to become like a social service agency that offers the helps needed by the people. Hence, the notion of the church being the body of Christ seems to gradually diminished, and the concept of the communal nature of the church, a spiritual coexistence, and interdependence of all members seems to have little meaning. This tends to lead the people to be passive-members—non-active participants—in the church and too much dependent on others.

In his book, *Do We Need a Church?* R. P. McBrien reminds us that the church must not look upon itself just as “a humanitarian social agency, or a group of like-minded individuals sharing a common perspective and moving here and there, wherever the action is.” He further contends, the theological reality of the church must go much deeper than that.<sup>16</sup> This being said, I want to propose an ecclesiology for social ministry with the following two characteristics: the church as the body of Christ and the church as a serving community.

### The Church as the Body of Christ

Hans Küng argues that the church as the body of Christ should not be based on an abstract idea, but it is important to see it as “the people of God placed by Christ in history.”<sup>17</sup> He says:

Only by seeing the Church as the people of God can we understand the idea of the Church as the body of Christ ... The Church is only the body of Christ insofar as it is the people of God; but by being the new people of God constituted by Christ it is truly the body of Christ.<sup>18</sup>

Küng’s view of the church as the body of Christ has two meanings: the church is real and it is a corporate community. What does it mean for the church to be a real and corporate community? How do we relate this to the concept of the church as a *diakonic* community?

The real nature of the church as a corporate community is best described when Paul refers to the Christian community in Corinth as the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:16f; 12:13, 14-27; 6:5-17). This community was “founded through baptism and realized through the Lord’s Supper as the body of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> For Richard Gaillardetz, the church as a corporate community of believers is “dynamic and organic,” which is constituted by “a shared life in Christ begun in baptism and nurtured in the Eucharist.”<sup>20</sup> Believers are called out by God through the Spirit into common life in Christ.

Stevens uses the Greek word *laos* to describe the church as the people of God. He further explains, “Being *laos* means that members of the people of God have communion with God and with one another without being merged with God or one another.”<sup>21</sup> He calls this a “prerichoretic

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<sup>16</sup> R. P. McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 98-99.

<sup>17</sup> Küng, *The Church*, 225.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>20</sup> Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 22.

<sup>21</sup> Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 60.

community,” a community without hierarchy, but with roles.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the church as the body of Christ or the people of God (*laos*) is one people composed of believers without discrimination against (Galatians 3:28). Each member, as Paul describes, has his or her role in the body of Christ according to his or her own spiritual gifts for the common good of the body (1 Corinthians 12).

Küng observes the fact that there is a link between the body of Christ and charismata. For Paul, Küng explains, the church is never “a gathering of charismatics enjoying their own private relationship with Christ independently of the community.”<sup>23</sup> All charismatics, he says, are “part of the body of Christ, of the community.”<sup>24</sup> Following Küng, Gaillardetz also asserts that Paul refers to “the communal nature of Christian life, a spiritual coexistence, and the interdependence of all the members” when he speaks of the church as the body of Christ.<sup>25</sup> Stevens also echoes this concept when he states, “all members of the *laos* of God belong to one another, minister to one another, need one another and contribute to the rich unity and ministry of the whole.”<sup>26</sup> A ministry of the whole people means all members of the body of Christ, according to their respective spiritual gifts, are called to get involved in the mission of God in the world. The many gifts of the Spirit in the body of Christ are meant for service.

#### The Church as a Serving Community

The church is not simply a social institution that is committed to providing the social and physical needs of its members. The church *is* the body of Christ, a community of believers who become the presence of Christ in the world. To put this in Bonhoeffer’s words, the church is “Christ existing as church-community.”<sup>27</sup> What does it mean for the church to be the body of Christ, existing as a *diakonic* community? How do we perceive the primary purpose of the church to be a serving community?

Bonhoeffer asserts that the church-community and its members are structurally “being-with-each-other” through Christ, which entails their “being-for-each-other” as vicarious representatives.<sup>28</sup> This active of “being-with-each-other” has two defining aspects: Christ is the measure and standard of believers’ conduct (John 13; 1 John 3), and their actions are the actions of members of the body of Christ, through which they may and ought to become a Christ to others (1 Corinthians 12; Romans 12; Ephesians 4). For Bonhoeffer, the idea of Christ’s representative action is the “structural principle of the Christian church-community.”<sup>29</sup> This, he explains, makes it possible for members of the church-community “to be active with-one-another and for-one-another.”<sup>30</sup> He states,

The church is the church only when it exists for others. To make a start, it should give away all its property to those in need. The clergy must live solely on the free-will offerings of their congregations, or possibly engage in some secular calling. The church

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>23</sup> Küng, *The Church*, 227.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 20.

<sup>26</sup> Stevens, *The Other Six Days*, 64.

<sup>27</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Sanctorum Communio: A Theological Study of the Sociology of the Church*. Translated by Joachim von Soosten, edited by Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998) 190. Emphasis in original.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 178, 191.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 182-184.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

must share in the secular problems of ordinary human life, not dominating, but helping and serving.<sup>31</sup>

Darrell Guder relates the concept of the church-community being active with-one-another and for-one-another to the incarnation of Jesus. He states, “the concept of the ‘Body of Christ’ is certainly one of the most incarnational” of the many images used for the church in the New Testament.<sup>32</sup> In fact, the life of the church is always meant to be incarnational. In this case, “the church is to represent in its service to humanity the incarnation of Christ, who came not to be served, but to serve (Mark 10:45).”<sup>33</sup> Guder states, as the Body of Christ, “we are the community through which Christ is present in and reaching out to the world. The witnessing role of the church is the representation to the world (and to each other in the church) of the fact and opportunity to the gospel.”<sup>34</sup> This is the servant nature of the church.

The service of the church flows out of the self-giving love of the Triune God who gives himself as a servant to humanity. Harper and Metzger argue, “To be human in the image of the Trinitarian God means to love others with a love that is costly and self-sacrificing.”<sup>35</sup> In the gospel of John, they explain, the Father sends the Son into the world to “give his life for his sheep, an act that is an outpouring of the Trinitarian Father and Son relationship, where the shared glory of Father and Son is manifest in the Son’s self-sacrifice for humanity.”<sup>36</sup> The primary calling of the church is purely to offer itself for others. The church as a servant is called to respond to social needs and problems in its immediate community.

## **Conclusion**

We have looked at the church as servant from a biblical and theological perspective, and discussed about an ecclesiology for social ministry, focusing on two related areas: the church as the body of Christ and the church as a serving community. It can be concluded that the church can be described as having at least three basic characteristics: it is communal, interdependent, and incarnational. First, the church as the body of Christ is *communal* in the sense that it is composed of believers who have different spiritual gifts. The church, viewed this way, is none other than “the fellowship of believers. Understanding the church from this perspective tends to move away from the traditional hierarchical model to the participative models of church.”<sup>37</sup> In this case, the participative view of the church reflects the perichoretic nature of the triune God. My research results indicate that Chin immigrant congregations still need to grow in this area, though they tend to describe their own ecclesiological identity as communal.

Second, the church as the body of Christ is *interdependent* in the sense that each member in the church belongs to the whole and each is responsible for the other. This view also reflects the perichoretic nature of the triune God. As Volf describes, reflecting on John 10:38; 17:21-23,

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<sup>31</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Rev. ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 203-204.

<sup>32</sup> Darrell L. Guder, *Be My Witness: The Church's Mission, Message, and Messengers* (Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1985), 27.

<sup>33</sup> Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 155.

<sup>34</sup> Guder, *Be My Witness*, 28.

<sup>35</sup> Harper and Metzger, *Exploring Ecclesiology*, 156.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Veli-Matti Karkkainen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Ecumenical, Historical, and Global Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 59.

“the Trinitarian persons are not only interdependent, but also *mutually internal*.”<sup>38</sup> This indicates that the church is not just a collection of individuals who expect their spiritual and social needs fulfilled. Rather, the church is a community of believers who are committed to mutually support one another. Third, the church as the body of Christ is *incarnational* in the sense that “it is participating in the act of God’s entering into the world in order to bear the burdens of humanity.”<sup>39</sup>

My research findings indicate that there is a sense of incarnational concept within the leadership and ministry practices of Chin immigrant churches. At the same time, they tend to focus too much on the social service aspect of the church, while neglecting the theological and spiritual aspect of it. Thus, I contend that a more intentional approach of *being* church needs to be developed within the Chin immigrant congregations. This means that the church should be more than a social institution, which tries to fulfill the social needs of its members. Rather, it is called to be a community of the body of Christ, a community that is being committed to serving others. In other words, the church is, first, a community of the body of Christ, and then second, a serving community.

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<sup>38</sup> Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 208. Emphasis in original.

<sup>39</sup> Craig Van Gelder and Dwight J. Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 114.