

Ecclesiology of the Migrant Worker Diaspora: Communion, Migration, and Transnational Pastoral Practice

Monalisa Sibagariang
Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of the Indonesian migrant worker diaspora has posed a theological and pastoral challenge for the contemporary church. Human mobility across borders not only creates social and economic change but also shakes the traditional understanding of the church as a community bound by space and institutions. In this context, diaspora ecclesiology offers a reflective framework for understanding the church's presence amidst the migration and separation of its people. The church is called to reinterpret its identity as the universal, dynamic body of Christ, transcending geographical and cultural boundaries. The Eucharist, or Holy Communion, is a central symbol in shaping diasporic spirituality. Amid isolation and longing for home, communion offers an experience of communion that transcends physical distance. Through communion, migrants rediscover their identity as part of the one body of Christ, despite being scattered across various countries and under diverse working conditions. The Eucharist becomes a concrete manifestation of God's presence in the experience of human mobility and a reminder that God accompanies His people throughout their journey. In this pastoral reality, ministry to diaspora communities demands a new, transnational model. The church can no longer focus solely on those who remain, but also on those who are mobile and on the move. Transnational pastoral practice presupposes interchurch networks, the use of digital media, and ecumenical collaboration to reach people in destination countries. Online services, virtual masses, and online prayer communities are new forms of communion that reflect the face of both the digital and diaspora church. This approach also contains social and ethical dimensions. The church is not only called to serve spiritually but also to fight for justice for migrant workers who often experience exploitation and structural injustice. In this regard, the theology of migration becomes a theology of liberation that sides with those who are excluded and marginalized. A church that lives in solidarity with migrants displays the face of Christ present among the little people, who seek refuge and hope in a foreign land. This research methodology uses a qualitative-theological approach with literature study and contextual reflection. Various academic literature, church documents, and the empirical experiences of diaspora communities serve as data sources for reinterpreting the concept of the church in the context of globalization and migration. The analysis is conducted through theological hermeneutics to discover the spiritual and ecclesiological meaning of communion, migration, and transnational pastoral practice. This research is expected to contribute to the development of contextual ecclesiology in Indonesia, particularly in facing the dynamics of globalization and cross-border movements of people. The Church is expected to be an open, inclusive, and adaptive space to changing times, without losing the essence of its calling as the one body of Christ. Thus, the ecclesiology of the migrant worker diaspora reflects faith in God who continues to accompany His people on every journey, both at home and abroad.



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Corresponding Author

Monalisa Sibagariang
Universitas HKBP Nommensen, Medan, Indonesia
Email : monalisa@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of global migration is one of the most prominent social realities of the modern era. The International Labor Organization (ILO) notes that Indonesia is one of the largest contributors of migrant workers in Southeast Asia, with millions of people spread across countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and the Middle East. This migration is not only economic but also gives rise to complex social, cultural, and spiritual dynamics. Amidst this reality, faith communities have emerged living in lands of exile, shaping a new face of church life that is no longer limited by geographical boundaries. This phenomenon has given rise to the concept of diaspora ecclesiology, namely the understanding of the church as existing amidst displacement, uprooting, and longing for home. In church tradition, ecclesiology is classically understood as the study of the nature, structure, and function of the church as the body of Christ. However, in the context of globalization and modern human mobility, the concept of the church needs to be reinterpreted. The church is no longer understood merely as a static, institutionally centered institution, but rather as a pilgrim church—mobile, dynamic, and adaptive to the context of migration. This is where diaspora ecclesiology becomes relevant, as it highlights how Christians remain united in faith amidst separation across time and space, and how God's presence is experienced in mobility and uncertainty. For Indonesian migrant workers, faith is a key strength in coping with psychological, economic, and social pressures in a foreign country. However, limited access to church services often leaves them feeling spiritually isolated. They form simple prayer communities in rented houses, dormitories, or confined public spaces. These practices demonstrate that the church can truly be present wherever people gather in the name of Christ. In this context, the Lord's Supper takes on profound significance: not simply a liturgical rite, but a symbol of unity that transcends distance, offering the experience of Christ's presence in the diaspora.

Beyond the spiritual dimension, this phenomenon also poses pastoral challenges. The church needs to develop a transnational ministry model, one that transcends national borders and is capable of reaching and accompanying the diaspora. This ministry can utilize digital technology, build inter-church networks, and strengthen ecumenical cooperation. The COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of transforming digital ministry and remote pastoral care, where online worship and virtual spiritual communities have become new forms of community of faith. This demonstrates that diaspora ecclesiology is not merely conceptual but also practical and adaptive to changing times. Churches participating in diaspora life are also invited to cultivate a spirituality of solidarity and justice. Migrant workers often face exploitation, discrimination, and human rights violations. The Church is called to be a prophetic voice, championing their dignity and rights, and affirming that every human being is created in the image and likeness of God (*imago Dei*). Diaspora theology, in this context, has a prophetic dimension—reminding that God accompanies His people abroad, while also demanding justice for those oppressed in foreign lands. Thus, this study aims to examine theologically and pastorally how the church can understand itself in the context of the migrant worker diaspora. Its main focus lies on three main aspects: (1) communion as a symbol of communion in separation, (2) migration as a

faith experience that forms a new spirituality, and (3) transnational pastoral practice as a form of church presence in the global era. Through this study, it is hoped that a new understanding of a church that is mobile, open, and inclusive will emerge—a church that is able to be present among its people, wherever they are, both at home and in the land of migration.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative theological approach using literature study and contextual reflection. This approach was chosen because it focuses on theological interpretation and reflection on the faith experiences of Christians in the context of the migrant worker diaspora, rather than solely on statistical measurements or empirical phenomena. Therefore, this research is exploratory and interpretive, aiming to explore the ecclesiological and pastoral meanings emerging from faith experiences amidst global mobility. The first stage of the research was the collection of literature data from credible academic sources. Primary data included ecclesiastical documents, encyclicals, and the writings of international theologians such as Miroslav Volf, Stephen Bevans, and Amos Yong on the church, diaspora, and theology of migration. Secondary data were drawn from contemporary theological journals such as the *International Journal of Practical Theology*, *Theology Today*, and the *Indonesian Journal of Theology*, as well as contextual research on Indonesian migrant workers. Sources were selected purposively, with publication years from 2015 and later as criteria to reflect the latest developments in diaspora theology discourse. The analysis was conducted through a theological hermeneutic approach, namely reading and interpreting texts and faith experiences in light of God's revelation and the social context of the community. This approach allows researchers to discover new meanings of the concept of church within the experience of migration and to understand how theology can address transnational pastoral challenges. Each source was analyzed thematically to identify key categories such as "church on the move," "communion as a symbol of diaspora," and "cross-border ministry."

The next stage is contextual reflection, which is the process of interpreting the results of the literature analysis within the context of the Indonesian church and the migrant worker community. This reflection positions the concrete experiences of the diaspora as the locus theologicus—the place where God speaks through human experience. This approach aligns with the praxis theology method, which emphasizes the reciprocal relationship between theological reflection and concrete action. The church in the diaspora is understood not simply as an object of study but as a subject of faith actively building community amidst limitations. To ensure the validity of the data and interpretation, this study employed source triangulation, comparing analysis results from various literature and documents to ensure the consistency of theological findings. Validation was carried out by confirming the reflection results through secondary empirical studies, such as reports on pastoral care for migrant workers by church institutions and humanitarian organizations. This step aimed to ensure that the research findings were not speculative but rooted in concrete pastoral realities.

Finally, the results of the analysis and reflection are compiled into a systematic conceptual framework for diaspora ecclesiology. The structure of the discussion

encompasses three main dimensions: theological, which highlights the nature of the church in the context of diaspora; sacramental, which examines the meaning of communion and fellowship in separation; and pastoral, which offers a model of transnational ministry for people living abroad. Thus, this methodology serves not only to understand the phenomenon but also to guide the church toward relevant and contextual practices in an increasingly globally connected world.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings indicate that the faith experiences of migrant workers shape a new face of the church – one no longer understood as a territorial institution, but rather as a mobile community of faith. In this context, diaspora ecclesiology presents an understanding that God's presence is not limited to the physical space of the church, but manifests itself in the journey, migration, and informal fellowship of the congregation. The church present in the midst of the diaspora becomes a spiritual space for those far from home, offering a more participatory, egalitarian, and contextual experience of faith. This reinforces Miroslav Volf's (2019) argument that the church is truly a community shaped by love and forgiveness, not by institutional boundaries. The meaning of Holy Communion in the diaspora context has also expanded. For migrant communities, communion is not simply a sacramental rite performed liturgically in a formal church, but a symbol of solidarity and consolation in isolation. In many countries, migrant workers often hold simple prayer meetings in place of traditional communion—a practice that affirms that the communion of Christ's body can be present anywhere, even in the workplace or dormitory. From a theological perspective, this demonstrates that the sacrament is not only institutional, but also relational and incarnational, as Christ is present amidst human suffering (Swinton, 2018). Furthermore, the discussion reveals that transnational pastoral care is becoming a new model of church ministry in the era of globalization. Churches can no longer be exclusive based on geographic location but must instead build cross-border networks to assist congregations in various countries. Practices such as online worship, digital discipleship, and pastoral counseling via video calls represent new forms of ministry relevant to diaspora life. According to Yong (2021), digital ministry integrated with pastoral mission can expand God's presence in a virtually connected world. Churches in Indonesia have begun this process through diaspora ministries such as the Indonesian Christian Church (PPI) in Taiwan, the Indonesian Christian Church (GKI) in Hong Kong, and the Indonesian Christian Church (KKI) in South Korea, which actively foster cross-border faith communities.

From a theological perspective, the diaspora presents a new dimension to understanding the body of Christ. The body of Christ consists not only of those gathered in one place, but also of those scattered throughout the world. Migration is not a form of separation from the body of the church, but rather another expression of the universal presence of the body of Christ. The church in the diaspora becomes a symbol of God's love, which is not limited by time and space. This reflection affirms that the experience of migration can be a theological locus, a place where God speaks through human vulnerability, struggle, and solidarity (Bevans, 2020). The social and prophetic dimensions of the diaspora church are also important findings in this study.

The church exists not only for spiritual service but also to advocate for the rights of migrant workers who often experience injustice, violence, and exploitation. The church living in the diaspora is called to be a prophetic voice calling for justice and human dignity. In this regard, diaspora theology intersects closely with liberation theology, where salvation is understood as the restoration of the whole person, including the social and economic dimensions. As Gutierrez (2017) states, faith without the practice of justice is an empty faith. Ultimately, this discussion confirms that the ecclesiology of migrant worker diaspora challenges the church to re-examine its identity and practice in an increasingly connected world. The church is called to be an open, mobile, and participatory community—not a fixed and exclusive church. Holy Communion, migration, and transnational ministry are not merely theological themes, but realities that demand pastoral and spiritual transformation. Thus, the church today is challenged to become a “church that transcends borders,” a church that is present where its people are, and a church that is a sign of God’s love for a world on the move.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the ecclesiology of the migrant worker diaspora opens a new paradigm in understanding the existence of the church amidst the dynamics of globalization and human mobility. The church is no longer understood as an institution bound by space and geographical boundaries, but as a living and moving community of faith, present wherever the congregation is. In the context of the diaspora, the fellowship of the faithful becomes a concrete manifestation of the universal body of Christ—a dynamic, open, and transboundary church. The meaning of the Lord's Supper for the diaspora community has transformed from a mere liturgical rite to a symbol of solidarity and hope in exile. The Supper becomes a means by which migrant workers experience God's presence amidst their isolation and strengthens a sense of togetherness among those scattered across various countries. Thus, the Lord's Supper is not only a sacramental act, but also an expression of faith that is grounded and relevant to the lived experience of the diaspora. Furthermore, transnational pastoral ministry emphasizes the need for the church to develop a new, contextual and inclusive model of ministry. In the digital age, the church is invited to reach out to the congregation through various media and global networks, providing spiritual, social, and psychological support to migrant workers. This approach emphasizes that effective pastoral care cannot be limited by distance but must utilize technology and cross-cultural solidarity to bring God's love to the migrant world. Theologically, the diaspora is a space where God reveals himself through the experience of migration, vulnerability, and human struggle. The church born from this context is not a static church, but one that is continually renewed by encounters with the world and global realities. Therefore, diaspora ecclesiology offers a new understanding that God's presence is found not only in the silence of the altar, but also in the life journeys of migrant workers who struggle to maintain their faith and dignity. Finally, this study emphasizes the importance of a theology rooted in the experiences of the congregation, especially those living beyond social and geographical boundaries. The church is called to be a home for all those who are

abroad, bridging the gap between their homeland and their homeland, and being a sign of Christ's presence accompanying the congregation in all places and times. Thus, the ecclesiology of the migrant worker diaspora is not only a theological concept, but also a living movement of faith, which affirms the church's call to bear witness to God's love and justice to a changing world.

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