

Shining the Light of Christ from Generation to Generation at True Light Lutheran Church in Chinatown, New York City

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True Light Lutheran Church stands at the corner of Worth and Mulberry Street in the heart of the oldest section of New York City's Chinatown.¹ Nearby is Confucius Plaza, City Hall, and the Brooklyn Bridge. True Light's façade at the crossroads of lower Manhattan features a towering cross illuminated at night to point to Jesus Christ, the true light that gives light to everyone.²

The ongoing story of True Light Lutheran Church proclaims the *missio Dei* in the context of New York City and incorporates Chinese and American cultures, languages, and members as one in Christ. As the fortieth-anniversary booklet of True Light Lutheran Church in 1976 affirms, True Light "was the first Lutheran mission church in the United States to preach the Word of God among the people of Chinese origin."³ True Light is the mother church of Chinese ministry in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. John 3:16 is inscribed in Chinese above the altar of True Light Lutheran Church along with the traditional Chinese character for love, which ties everything together in perfect harmony.⁴ Established as a Chinese Lutheran mission congregation in 1936, today there are weekly Sunday worship services in English and Chinese. Countless lives have been changed through the ministry and mission of God at True Light Lutheran Church and the congregation continues to shine the light of Christ in New York City and beyond.

True Light Lutheran Church presents a unique case study for intergenerational and intercultural mission and ministry in North America. The church has served multiple generations of Chinese immigrants and American-born Chinese and now includes non-Chinese members.

This article attempts to answer why True Light Lutheran Church has connected across cultures, languages, and generations. We will take an overview of the history of True Light, as well as observing cross-cultural pressures and opportunities within the Chinese community in New York. Along the way, we will see the shining lights of Christ in past and present members of True Light Lutheran Church⁵ that reflect the importance of the



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following missiological elements: culturally attuned and contextual evangelism, the traditional Chinese concept of harmony as centered in Christ, and experience of the welcoming love of Jesus, the Light of the world, in the heart of New York City's Chinatown. From the start, True Light has been a Chinese Lutheran Church with a global reach in the center of New York, an international city.

The history of True Light begins with the shining light of Miss Mary E. Banta, illuminating the intercultural mission of the Gospel and contextual evangelism.⁶ Born in Upper Sandusky, Ohio, in 1875, her father was a preacher in Canada. In 1880 she moved with her family to New York City. In training as a missionary, Miss Banta taught English to Chinese men at a Baptist church in Brooklyn. Over time the students began to seek and find the love of God in Christ the Savior, inspired by Miss Banta's faith and witness. This awakened in her a lifelong commitment to teaching the Gospel of Jesus to the Chinese people. In 1901, Miss Banta was sent to serve as missionary in Liberia, where she contracted black water fever. Due to her illness, she returned to New York; and after recovering, became connected with the Methodist Church's Chinese mission work on the east side (Chinatown) in New York.

Starting in 1905, Miss Banta began diligent work among the Chinese in New York and taught English and the Bible. Through her patience, love, and cultural understanding, she earned the confidence of many Chinese families. Her influence was far-reaching in Chinatown as a teacher, social worker, and friend. After listening to the messages of Dr. Walther A. Maier, speaker of the Lutheran Hour, Miss Banta requested to join the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod and was confirmed on March 29, 1936. That same year saw the formation of True Light Lutheran Church which originally met in a loft, dubbed Gospel Hall, on Canal Street in Chinatown.

In 1938, due to an overflow in new members, the church began meeting at a larger loft on Canal Street. Soon, to accommodate the influx of new Chinese members, and with the full support of the Atlantic District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, the congregation moved to its current location, a five-story dilapidated former factory in the leather industry at the corner of Worth and Mulberry Street. With financial donations from the Atlantic District and the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, and the support of members, the building was restored and transformed into True Light Lutheran Church and School. Miss Banta continued to assist Rev. Louis T. Buchheimer, pastor of True Light until 1959.

In May 1959, Miss Banta was honored at a Chinese banquet for her fifty-five years of work among the Chinese people of New York City. She died in 1971 and is still fondly remembered and revered for living and telling the love of Christ in Chinatown. Before her death, she said, "I don't want an elaborate tombstone when I die because this building is my monument. This is what I've always dreamed of for True Light."⁷ Miss Banta's missionary endeavors exhibit culturally attuned evangelism, which remains apparent in the array of Chinese architectural accouterments adorning True Light Lutheran Church. The appointed location of True Light in the epicenter of the original Chinatown and at the historically significant and economically depressed "Five Points Neighborhood" in lower Manhattan also affirm the importance of place for the proclamation of the Gospel. As is

apparent in Miss Banta's own life story, True Light Lutheran Church has consistently maintained a harmony of Chinese and American English languages and cultures.

True Light Lutheran Church observes the Chinese characteristic of harmony—harmony here of Chinese and American cultures centered in Christ. This has mainly occurred in the interplay of members and seekers born in China and American-born Chinese.⁸ In formal and informal discussions and interactions with shining lights of Christ at True Light Lutheran Church—long-time and newer members of the congregations—the following points on Christian harmony have proven consistent. First, members tend to remain at the congregation as they are ultimately there to worship God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, receive the gifts of God for the people of God, and find delight in the strong relationships flowing from altar, font, and pulpit and formed by the Word and Spirit at work in the congregation. Second, True Light's strengths are expressed in the loyalty of many members, and their mutual caring for each other across generations. Many current members had parents who were involved in the church and have attended the congregation for years and even decades.

Third, True Light has traditionally included a dynamic blend of members born in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, and Chinese members born in America and enculturated in New York City. While this has sometimes led to friction between Chinese face-saving culture and in-your-face New York City culture, overall, it has rejuvenated intercultural bonds within the congregation. Fourth, many members appreciate opportunities afforded to contribute and help at the congregation no matter their age or language.

Finally, there is the New York City effect. New York City beckons residents from around the world and is a vibrant, diverse, and tolerant metropolis. True Light Lutheran Church continues to benefit from its prime location in New York's original Chinatown and downtown Manhattan as the congregation regularly welcomes first-time attendees, with the consistent practice of the art of Christian hospitality. As paraphrased from one long-time, active member of the congregation—True Light, is an English and Chinese and welcoming church, a balance and harmony of old and new, avoiding of extremes and rough edges, a spiritual home in Christ for understanding.

In addition to intercultural harmony, True Light Lutheran Church actively utilizes the importance of its prime location in Manhattan's Chinatown. This has been expressed to me as the True Light feeling of belonging. While situated in Manhattan's Chinatown, members now live near and far. As one member put it, Chinatown has an enduringly positive reputation among Chinese-Americans and newcomers from China. Given the recent rise in anti-Asian violence, Manhattan's Chinatown is seen as a safe place for Asian Americans and Asian immigrants.

True Light Lutheran Church hosts a popular Chinese (Mandarin) language after-school program on weekdays for children in Chinatown which has led to new members of the congregation. In addition to the after-school program, the church sponsors a well-attended summer Chinese language camp that draws children from different neighborhoods and boroughs of New York City. True Light Lutheran Church in Manhattan's Chinatown has a sense of home which extends beyond the borough of Manhattan and attracts newcomers from diverse cultural backgrounds.

True Light maintains a neighborhood vibe and many members consider Chinatown a cultural center. For example, even though New York City now has a number of Chinatowns, members of True Light comment that the best roast pork barbeque buns are still found in Manhattan's Chinatown. Chinatown and True Light Lutheran Church go together. True Light Lutheran Church now has a majority of American-born Chinese members. Demographically, the congregation is predominately Asian and becoming more diverse as reflected in the changing context of Manhattan's Chinatown.

Here are some of the current ways that True Light Lutheran Church practices the traditional Chinese approach of harmony, stays culturally attuned in worship, and extends intercultural and inter-language hospitality in New York City from generation to generation. True Light Lutheran Church has Sunday services in English (10:00 am) and Chinese (12:30 pm). The governing board of True Light Lutheran Church is a balance of six members from the English language service and six members from the Chinese language service. Furthermore, the governing board seeks consensus and harmony in its deliberations and decisions. Many of the members of the governing board are second- and third-generation Chinese-Americans and daughters and sons of members of True Light.

True Light Lutheran Church hosts troops of Boy and Girl Scouts of America that meet weekly (and who have met for decades and generations at True Light). The church building houses an air-conditioned gym which is used daily by different groups: Chinese language after-school and summer programs, Boy and Girl Scouts, and senior citizen associations of table tennis players (the gym also includes ping-pong tables), among others. Chinese and Chinese-American senior citizens gather for community events during the course of the year in the church's classrooms, sanctuary, and basement.

The signs and posters throughout the church building are in Chinese and English. Both the Chinese and English language Sunday services project the liturgy, readings, and pertinent information in Chinese and English. Newcomers to both services are greeted by church members in either Chinese or English or even sometimes Spanish. Sunday services often include LCMS members visiting New York City from across the United States. The baptismal font of True Light Lutheran Church is in the shape of a pagoda crowned by the cross. Sermons in the English and Chinese services often include Chinese terms and concepts as applied to the Christian Gospel. The congregation routinely places tables with Bibles, Small Catechisms, and Lutheran materials in Chinese and English outside the entrance of the church on the busy corner of Worth and Mulberry Streets.

True Light continues to be a desired destination for memorial services. During the summer of 2022, the sanctuary was filled to capacity for a memorial service in Chinese and English for a longtime member of the congregation who had moved to Florida. The memorial service concluded with a Chinese banquet at a nearby restaurant and catering hall in Chinatown. Special services at True Light Lutheran Church incorporate English and Chinese, and include English and Chinese choirs.

True Light Lutheran Church advertises in local news outlets (online and in print) in Chinese and English in Chinatown, downtown Manhattan, and Flushing, Queens. True Light Lutheran Church maintains an ongoing mission and ministry satellite worshipping community in Mandarin in Chinatown, Flushing, Queens that meets on Sunday mornings.

Extending from Chinatowns in Manhattan to Queens, True Light Lutheran Church's Christian hospitality and Gospel reach embraces the first, second, and third generations of Chinese and Chinese-Americans, new and old members from China, New York City, and beyond, and guests and friends in English, Cantonese, and Mandarin.

Considering the future, True Light Lutheran Church aims to welcome new members and seekers in the love of Jesus, the Light of the world. When asked why the name True Light matters, members expressed that the church is called True Light for following the true light of God as revealed in Jesus Christ, the way, the truth, and the life.⁹ When asked what the church might look like twenty years from now, church members affirmed that by God's grace it still will be a place where the light of Christ shines and gives light to everyone. True Light Lutheran Church seeks to build upon its feeling of belonging in Chinatown by continuing to minister intergenerationally and interculturally in Cantonese, Mandarin, and English, and connecting with Chinese Lutheran ministries and missions in Asia and across North America.

True Light Lutheran Church offers lessons for intercultural and intergenerational Christian ministries and missions. Why has True Light Lutheran Church connected across cultures and generations? With the guidance and sustenance of God's abiding and illuminating grace, True Light Lutheran Church synthesizes the missiological elements of culturally attuned, contextual evangelism, with the traditional Chinese concept of harmony as centered in Christ, adapting to the realities of Chinatown, and experiencing the welcoming love of Jesus, the Light of the world.

Chinese understandings of seeking harmony and the history of True Light Lutheran Church reminds us of the importance of working together and the role of districts and the larger synod in facilitating the development of existing and potential missions and ministries. As we realize resource depletion, the collective origins of True Light Lutheran Church commend us to consider similar situations and solutions from the past for boldness in faith for the present.

A harmony shown in Miss Banta's collective and intercultural work in English and Chinese reveals a *yin and yang* Christian approach to different cultures and languages in and through Christ.¹⁰ Instead of seeing one culture and language as distinct from another, a *yin and yang* Christ-centered approach realizes Chinese and American cultures in harmony as mutually beneficial and reflective of the other. The *yin and yang* approach to Christian ministry and mission may be applied to other intercultural contexts. Furthermore, immigrant and newcomer ministries and missions like True Light Lutheran Church remind all generations of Christians that they are strangers and sojourners who await the city of God, who, in faith, hope, and love even now extend hospitality in the name of Jesus in their cities, towns, and communities.¹¹ The traditional Chinese characters for True Light can also be translated as Spirit Light. Since 1936, True Light has been borne by the Word and Spirit of God. As Scripture teaches and the example of True Light Lutheran Church attests, it is only through the Word and Spirit wherein Christians discover unity in harmony.¹² New Yorkers like to think that they live in the center of the world and this sentiment resonates for True Light as the future looks bright for collaborations with Lutheran Chinese ministries and missions around the globe. True Light, the mother church of Chinese

ministry and mission in the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, continues to shine the light of Christ from generation to generation.

ENDNOTES

¹ Information about True Light Lutheran Church, including a history of the ministry and mission in Chinatown, is found on the church's website: test.truelightlutheran.org.

² John 1:9. Miss Mary E. Banta also emphasized Zechariah 14:7 (“When evening comes there will be light.”) as a theme verse for True Light Lutheran Church.

³ *True Light Lutheran Church 40th Anniversary* (self-published booklet). The quote is from the Rev. Philip N. Yang, pastor of True Light from 1965–1995. Rev. Philip Yang was born in China, attended Hong Kong Lutheran Theological Seminary and Concordia Lutheran Theological Seminary, Springfield, Illinois, and is widely respected today for his active community engagement in Chinatown and for his faithfulness in serving as pastor of True Light. He worshiped at True Light this past Easter Sunday (2022).

⁴ Colossians 3:14.

⁵ Daniel 12:3; Matthew 5:14; Philippians 2:15.

⁶ Information on Mary E. Banta in this article is from *The Biography of our Mary E. Banta* (self-published booklet) from True Light Lutheran Church made in 1954 and reprinted and updated in 2016, and from *True Light Lutheran Church 40th Anniversary* booklet.

⁷ Quoted in *The Biography of our Mary E. Banta*.

⁸ One active member of True Light described this diversity as ABC (American born Chinese), HBC (Hong Kong born Chinese), CBC (China born Chinese), TBC (Taiwan born Chinese), and all one in Christ, the True Light.

⁹ John 14:6.

¹⁰ While the *yin and yang* is often associated with Daoism, the concept is used here in direct relation to the Christian understanding of *logos*. *Logos* is an ancient Greek philosophical term that was baptized, reinterpreted, and reimagined in Christ (John 1:1–18). In many Chinese editions of the Bible, *logos* is translated as *dao*, an ancient Chinese philosophical term now properly understood in and through Christ, the Word of God. Thus, the Word of God, the pre-incarnate *logos* and the incarnate Jesus Christ, is the *dao* (*logos*), and the source and realization of Christian concordance and unity in the diversity of the Body of Christ in many and various cultures and languages. Cf., the hermeneutical-missiological method of Saint Augustine of Hippo who advised plundering the wisdom of the Egyptians (i.e., ancient pagan cultures) in order to bring all things under subjection to Christ so that God may be all in all (Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana*; Exodus 3:22; 1 Corinthians 15:27–28).

¹¹ Hebrews 11:13–16; 1 Corinthians 13:13; Hebrews 13:2.

¹² Ephesians 2.