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CHURCH AND CHURCH BUILDING: Interview-Based Meanings Among Minority Catholics, Pinang Parish, Tangerang, Indonesia

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Abstract

This study investigates what the church building means for the Catholic faithful of Pinang Parish, Tangerang (Archdiocese of Jakarta). Using semi-structured interviews with seventeen parishioners and a phenomenological thematic analysis, it adopts a phenomenological–theological approach to interpret how the building is lived within everyday faith. Five themes emerged: identity, communion, stability, sacredness, and fulfillment. Participants describe the new church as making the community public and recognizable ("now we can point and say, this is our church"), gathering ministries into a stable locus for fellowship and service, and relieving the insecurity of rotating or provisional worship spaces. They also speak of an atmosphere that disposes reverence and of a sense of arrival after a long struggle for official permission to build. Wallenfang's notion of paradox clarifies this experience: the church is held together as a concrete structure and as a sacramental sign—visible and fragile, yet experienced as mediating God's dwelling that exceeds visibility. For a minority community, the building thus embodies perseverance and joy while reconfiguring how the faithful understand themselves as Church. The study advances ecclesiological reflection on sacred architecture by offering a bottom-up account of how lay experience and contested building processes shape ecclesial self-understanding, with relevance to wider debates on disputed worship spaces in minority contexts.

Keywords:
Catholic faithful; church building; ecclesiology; paradox; phenomenology.

INTRODUCTION

A paradox marks Catholic reflection on church buildings: the Church is the People of God, yet a church building often becomes the tangible sign through which that people can gather, endure, and be recognized. This tension becomes especially concrete in minority contexts such as Indonesia, where constructing a church building can entail prolonged uncertainty and contestation. Pinang Parish in Tangerang (Archdiocese of Jakarta) lived for years without a dedicated church building, celebrating the liturgy in temporary venues while navigating bureaucratic procedures and local resistance. Indonesian socio-legal scholarship notes that the 2006 Joint Ministerial Decree (PBM) on houses of worship often shifts religious freedom from a constitutional guarantee into a

locally negotiated process, since its "special requirements" are mediated through neighborhood consent and administrative discretion.[1] Public controversies such as the long-running GKI Yasmin case in Bogor further illustrate how minority congregations can remain vulnerable to prolonged contestation even when formal legal pathways have been pursued.[2]

Yet while ecclesiology and sacred architecture have widely discussed the place of church buildings, comparatively little research examines how ordinary Catholics—especially in Indonesia—experience and interpret the meaning of a church building as lived ecclesial reality. This study addresses that gap by asking: How do the faithful of Pinang Parish experience the meaning of their church building, and what does that lived meaning disclose about the relationship between Church-as-People and church-as-building? Using a phenomenological–theological approach, the article describes and interprets parishioners' accounts, showing how the building is lived as identity and visibility, communion, stability, sacredness, and fulfillment.

The paradox is already implicit in the Church's authoritative teaching. Vatican II emphasizes that the Church is first and foremost a communion of believers united in Christ.[3] At the same time, the Catechism affirms that "visible churches are not simply gathering places but signify and make visible the Church living in this place."[4] Sacrosanctum Concilium likewise teaches that sacred buildings are ordered to divine

[1] *Peraturan Bersama Menteri Agama dan Menteri dalam Negeri Republik Indonesia Nomor 9 Tahun 2006 dan Nomor 8 Tahun 2006 tentang Pedoman Pelaksanaan Tugas Kepala Daerah/Wakil Kepala Daerah dalam Pemeliharaan Kerukunan Umat Beragama, Pemberdayaan Forum Kerukunan Umat Beragama, dan Pendirian Rumah Ibadat* (2006), https://ntt.kemenag.go.id/file/file/dokumen/rndz1384483132.pdf; Binsar A. Hutabarat, "Evaluasi terhadap Peraturan Bersama Menteri Tahun 2006 tentang Pendirian Rumah Ibadah," *Societas Dei: Jurnal Agama dan Masyarakat* 4, no. 1 (2017): 10–11. https://doi.org/10.33550/sd.v4i1.41.

[2] Gusti Grehenso, "GKI Yasmin Case Revisited: Why Relocation Isn't the Answer for Resolving Freedom of Religion Conflicts," Universitas Gadjah Mada, January 11, 2024, https://ugm.ac.id/en/news/gki-yasmin-case-revisited-why-relocation-isnt-the-answer-for-resolving-freedom-of-religion-conflicts/; Alamsyah M. Djafar and A'an Suryana, "What the Gereja Kristen Indonesia (GKI) Yasmin Case Says about Religious Freedom in Indonesia," *Fulcrum* (ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute), September 26, 2023, https://fulcrum.sg/what-the-gereja-kristen-indonesia-gki-yasmin-case-says-about-religious-freedom-in-indonesia/.

[3] Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church), November 21, 1964, nos. 9–17, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

[4] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 1180, https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/__P3A.HTM.

worship and express the faith of the community.[5] The question, then, is not whether Church-as-People should be prioritized over church-as-building (or vice versa), but how the two belong together in believers' lived experience—especially where the possibility of building is itself contested.

Ecclesiological reflection has consistently underlined the Church as communion rather than property. Congar's vision of the People of God empowered by the Spirit,[6] Rahner's account of the Church's sacramental character,[7] Ratzinger's insistence that the Church is not a voluntary association,[8] and Dulles's retrieval of the People of God image within his discipleship model[9] converge in stressing that ecclesial identity is ultimately personal and communal rather than architectural. Yet these approaches also imply that communion must become visible and embodied in history. Precisely here the Pinang case becomes significant: parishioners' testimonies suggest that "being Church" was experienced as socially fragile while worship remained in borrowed space, and that the church building became a concrete condition through which recognition, gathering, and formation could become sustainable.

Theology of sacred architecture likewise recognizes that church buildings do more than accommodate worship. McNamara stresses that sacred architecture can orient the faithful toward eschatological hope,[10] while Ratzinger argues that church space should turn the community together toward God, rather than inward toward itself.[11] Schloeder emphasizes that a church building can function as a sacramental sign through form, orientation, and symbolism,[12] and Kieckhefer shows how spatial, aesthetic, and symbolic

[5] Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy), December 4, 1963, nos. 122–124, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

[6] Yves M. J. Congar, *Lay People in the Church: A Study for a Theology of Laity*, trans. Donald Attwater, rev. ed., with additions by the author (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1965), 6, 18.

[7] Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 11–12, 18.

[8] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 77.

[9] Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded ed. (New York: Image Books, Doubleday, 2002), ebook, chap. XIII, "The Church: Community of Disciples" (esp. the section "Adequacy of the Discipleship Model").

[10] Denis R. McNamara, *Catholic Church Architecture and the Spirit of the Liturgy* (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2009), 71-81, 213.

[11] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Fortieth Anniversary ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2018), 95–98.

[12] Steven J. Schloeder, *Architecture in Communion: Implementing the Second Vatican Council through Liturgy and Architecture* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 12, 44, 174.

factors converge to shape ecclesial life.[13] These perspectives clarify why the Pinang faithful describe the building not only in practical terms, but as a site where identity becomes visible, communion becomes durable, reverence becomes easier, and hope becomes inhabitable.

Indonesian scholarship also enriches this discourse by emphasizing both ecclesial communion and the meaning of church buildings. Dien highlights the Church as a community of the People of God whose life is inseparable from fellowship,[14] while Simanjuntak and Saragih show how biblical virtues (humility, patience, mutual care) sustain communal life.[15] A quantitative study further indicates that the stronger the meaning attached to a church building, the stronger the congregation's motivation to participate in its construction—driven less by size or grandeur than by perceived sacredness and communal value.[16] Architectural scholarship likewise examines how sacred space embodies theology and culture: studies interpreting Mangunwijaya's church architecture show how religiosity is embedded through form, light, and spatial design;[17] other studies argue that church architecture should integrate theology, local culture, and contextual sensitivity,[18] and that Nusantara elements can be incorporated while remaining faithful to liturgical norms.[19] Across these contributions, the motif of the

[13] Richard Kieckhefer, *Theology in Stone: Church Architecture from Byzantium to Berkeley* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 10–11.

[14] Novry Dien, "Gereja Persekutuan Umat Allah," *Media: Jurnal Filsafat dan Teologi* 1, no. 1 (2020): 49–64, https://doi.org/10.53396/media.v1i1.6.

[15] M. Marihot Simanjuntak and Lestania Irawanni Saragih, "Membangun Persekutuan Jemaat Seturut Efesus 4:1–16 di Stasi Santo Petrus Pematang Purba Saribudolog," Jurnal Ilmiah Religiosity Entity Humanity (JIREH) 6, no. 1 (2024): 57–63, https://doi.org/10.37364/jireh.v6i1.225.

[16] Meri Ervi Yana Nasila, Lefran Lambolangi, and Niel Kapoginta Parinsi, "Pengaruh Makna Gedung Gereja terhadap Motivasi Partisipasi dalam Pembangunan dengan Mediasi Persepsi Kemegahan Gereja," *Tevunah: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristen* 2, no. 1 (2024): 63–82, https://zenodo.org/records/19944496.

[17] Dionius Bismoko Mahamboro, Romualdus Setyo Hadi, and Michael Reskiantio Pabubung, "Mangunwijaya's Concept of Religiosity in His Architectural Work of Gereja Maria Assumpta (GMA), Klaten-Indonesia," *Indonesian Journal of Religion and Society* 6, no.1 (2024): 1-13, https://doi.org/10.36256/ijrs.v6i1.366.

[18] Aloisius Des Afriando Sinuraya and Yusak Soleiman, "Memaknai Perkembangan Seni dan Arsitektur Gereja: Kontribusi Pemikiran Murray A. Rae terhadap Arsitektur GBKP," *Gema Teologika* 9, no. 2 (2024): 163–64, 167, https://doi.org/10.21460/gema.2024.92.1177; Fitry Hanna Hutagalung, "Arsitektur Gereja yang Kontekstual," *Dunamis: Jurnal Teologi dan Pendidikan Kristiani* 9, no. 1 (2024): 41-68, https://doi.org/10.30648/dun.v9i1.1355.

[19] Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 37–40 and 122–127; Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, *Varietates legitimae* (Instruction on the Roman Liturgy and Inculturation), January 25, 1994, nos. 34–35 and 46, https://www.cultodivino.va/content/dam/cultodivino/documenti/Varietates-Legitimae.pdf; Dionius B. Mahamboro, Hilarius T. Barana, and Rosalia Rachma, "Makna Teologis Tabernakel Berbentuk Alang di Toraja dari Perspektif Prinsip Dwilogi Mangunwijaya," *Fidei* 7, no. 1 (2024): 97–100; Polin Marsahala Simanjuntak, Yusuf Affendi, and Sangayu Ketut Laksemi, "Akulturasi dan Asimilasi Ornamen Gorga Batak

church as the "House of God" remains central; yet fewer studies foreground how congregations themselves articulate the lived meaning of finally having a church building after prolonged struggle.

Beyond Indonesia, debate persists about whether church buildings are indispensable or dispensable. French shows how different theological and practical emphases produce divergent conclusions, while also arguing that space matters for mission and communal identity.[20] Kwon similarly highlights the strategic value of church buildings for presence and renewal.[21] Liturgical theology reinforces this perspective: the Rite of Dedication portrays the church building as a "special image" of the People of God gathered in Christ.[22] Together, these sources suggest that church buildings are neither neutral utilities nor mere liabilities, but meaningful—often contested—expressions of ecclesial life.

The Indonesian context makes these tensions especially sharp. Although religious freedom is constitutionally guaranteed, constructing churches remains difficult: the 2006 Joint Ministerial Decree continues to function as a structural barrier through demanding requirements for community consent and bureaucratic approval.[23] Some congregations have waited many years for approval, while others have been repeatedly denied despite compliance.[24] These struggles are not abstract: they shape how communities experience worship, belonging, and hope. Pinang Parish shared in this ordeal, and its eventual success underscores why the meaning of the church building cannot be reduced to functionality alone.

Toba dalam Arsitektur Gereja Katolik St Mikael, Pangururan," *Jurnal Seni & Reka Rancang* 1, no. 2 (2019): 235–37, https://doi.org/10.25105/jsrr.v1i2.6736.

[20] Matthew J. French, "The Debate on the Necessity of Church Buildings Through the Lens of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral," Monarch Review 4 (2017): 24–25, https://www.methodist.edu/academics/centers/ research/monarch-review/vol-4/, PDF, https://www.methodist.edu/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/mr2017_french.pdf.

[21] Duke Kwon, "The Underrated Strategic Value of Church Buildings," *The Gospel Coalition*, April 25, 2018, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/underrated-value-church-buildings/; and Jeremy Treat, "Rebuilding for Renewal: The Importance of Sacred Spaces in Our Cities," *The Gospel Coalition*, April 1, 2025, https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/rebuilding-for-renewal/.

[22] Denis R. McNamara, "The Rite Way to Understand a Church Building: Theology of the Order of the Dedication of a Church and an Altar," *Adoremus*, July 15, 2021, https://adoremus.org/2021/07/the-rite-way-to-understand-a-church-building/.

[23] *Peraturan Bersama Menteri Agama dan Menteri Dalam Negeri Republik Indonesia Nomor 9 Tahun 2006 dan Nomor 8 Tahun 2006*.

[24] Puji Astuti, "Pdt.Stephen Tong Dan Gereja Megah Bernilai Milyaran Rupiah," Jawaban.com, October 6, 2008, https://www.jawaban.com/read/article/id/2008/10/06/90/081005224200/goo.gl/page/1 (accessed February 13, 2026).

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological approach to uncover the lived meaning of the church building for minority Catholics in Pinang Parish, Tangerang, within the Archdiocese of Jakarta. Phenomenology was chosen because it attends carefully to how participants experience a phenomenon and distills its essential structures of meaning from first-person accounts rather than imposing external explanations. As Zahavi notes, phenomenology begins from how the world is given in lived experience and clarifies the meanings that are already at work in that experience. [25]

At the same time, this study integrates theology into phenomenological description. Following Donald Wallenfang, phenomenology can be practiced *in lumine Christi*, in the light of Christ, so that the givenness of human experience is not isolated from theological meaning.[26] This does not treat parishioners' narratives as "mere data," but as loci of theological reflection. To avoid premature doctrinal closure, theological interpretation is kept tethered to participants' descriptions and is developed more explicitly in the Discussion section.

Seventeen parishioners were selected through purposive sampling. The main criterion was sustained personal experience of parish life during the decades-long absence of a church building and the eventual establishment of one. The group included men and women, younger and older members, and individuals engaged in different parish ministries. All participants gave consent to be interviewed. In presenting testimonies, anonymity is preserved by referring to participants in general terms (e.g., "one parishioner recalled") and by removing identifying details. Given purposive recruitment through parish networks, participants were more likely to be engaged members, which may accentuate positive meanings and underrepresent more ambivalent or marginal experiences.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted in Indonesian. Each interview lasted approximately 45–60 minutes and invited participants to narrate (a) worship without a church building, (b) experiences of temporary spaces, and (c) reflections on the meaning of finally having a parish church. Open-ended questions encouraged narrative responses (e.g., "What does the church mean to you?"; "How did

[25] Dan Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2025), 30.

[26] Donald Wallenfang, *Phenomenology: A Basic Introduction in the Light of Jesus Christ* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2019), ebook, Introduction.

you experience parish life during the years without a building?"). Interviews were audio-recorded with permission and transcribed verbatim.

Analysis followed the phenomenological procedure outlined by Clark Moustakas.[27] The process began with repeated reading of each transcript to gain a holistic sense of the account. Horizonalization was implemented by line-by-line highlighting of all expressions that disclosed the participant's lived sense of the church building; each highlighted segment was treated as a candidate "horizon," then pruned by removing overlaps and statements that did not clearly answer the meaning-question. We maintained an audit trail linking (1) verbatim excerpts, (2) condensed meaning units, and (3) the higher-order thematic clusters, so that each theme remained traceable to participant language. The resulting meaning units were clustered into thematic structures and developed into textural descriptions ("what" was experienced) and structural descriptions ("how" it was experienced in context). The results were synthesized as theme narratives that preserve participants' voice while articulating the meaning-structure shared across accounts.

To enhance analytic transparency, Braun and Clarke's practical guide to thematic analysis was used as an organizing tool for coding discipline, theme definition, and auditability. Because Braun and Clarke present thematic analysis as a flexible analytic method that does not prescribe theoretical positions, or any particular epistemological or ontological framework, we used it instrumentally, only for organizing and reporting patterns among phenomenological meaning units.[28] While phenomenology provided the philosophical orientation (meaning-structure from lived experience), thematic analysis supported the practical work of systematically grouping meaning units and sharpening theme boundaries. To avoid the tension of reducing phenomenological meanings to merely topical categories, theme development was guided by the question of meaning-structure (textural/structural descriptions) rather than by frequency alone.

Quotations were selected using three criteria: representativeness (clearly expressing a shared meaning), intensity (capturing affective weight), and thematic clarity

[27] Clark E. Moustakas, *Phenomenological Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994), ebook, chap. 7, "Phenomenological Research: Analyses and Examples" (esp. the "Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data"), and Appendix C, "Outline Summary of the Phenomenological Model."

[28] Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, *Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide* (London: Sage, 2022), 4–6, 76–90.

(most directly illuminating a theme's experiential core). Confidentiality was preserved throughout the research process: identifying details were removed from transcripts, and participants were invited to review short summaries of their contributions for accuracy. Because the study relies on purposive sampling (n=17), findings are presented as an in-depth account of this case rather than as statistically generalizable claims; transferability depends on similarity of context, especially minority settings shaped by contested worship space.

Finally, drawing on Larsen and Adu's reflections on theoretical frameworks in phenomenological research,[29] the study aligned sampling, interviewing, and analysis with its guiding concern: to disclose the meaning of the church building as lived by the faithful. A reflexive limitation should be noted: writing within a Catholic theological horizon, the researchers interpret testimonies as theologically meaningful while taking care to foreground participants' language and to avoid importing conclusions not supported by the interviews.

RESULT

The interviews with parishioners of Pinang Parish yielded rich descriptions of their decades-long experience without a dedicated church building and the eventual joy of obtaining one. Building on the phenomenological orientation described in the Method, the transcripts were read iteratively to identify significant statements, cluster them into meaning units, and condense these units into themes. Excerpts were selected for their vividness, representativeness across participants, and their capacity to disclose a shared meaning-structure, and they are presented as authentic evidence of how parishioners themselves articulate the significance of their church building. Five essential themes emerged: identity and visibility, communion and fellowship, security and stability, sacred atmosphere and solemnity, and homecoming and fulfillment.

Theme 1: Identity and Visibility

Experiential core: the church building is experienced as recognition—a public "address" that allows the Catholic community to be seen, named, and acknowledged in the local lifeworld.

[29] Hendrik Gert Larsen and Philip Adu, *The Theoretical Framework in Phenomenological Research: Development and Application* (London: Routledge, 2021), 127–28.

For many parishioners, the absence of a building carried recurring experiences of being questioned and, in subtle ways, rendered socially invisible. One parishioner recalled, "For so many years, people asked us: where is your church? We could not answer, because we only rented halls. Now we can finally point and say, this is our church." Another reflected, "The building makes us feel recognized. Before, it seemed like we were outsiders, even though we lived here for decades. Now, people know we belong."

Across accounts, visibility is not merely symbolic but lived as recognition in everyday encounters: having a place one can point to, name, and invite others into. Without a stable place, parish identity remained difficult to "locate" in ordinary conversation; the community experienced itself as provisional—always borrowing, always explaining, and vulnerable to dismissal. With the building, the horizon of experience shifts from impermanence to situatedness. Parishioners speak of moving from "wandering" to being "settled," and from being "hidden" to being "seen." The change is felt as legitimacy and dignity: parishioners describe a new ease in inviting others, and an increased confidence that Catholics truly belong in this neighborhood.

Essence statement: the church building makes communal identity publicly inhabitable; it is experienced as the material condition by which a minority community becomes recognizable as a community.

Theme 2: Communion and Fellowship

Experiential core: the church building is experienced as a shared place that thickens relationships, stabilizes rhythms of gathering, and enables koinonia to take durable form.

Parishioners frequently contrasted temporary venues with the new church as a concrete center of communion. One explained, "When we only met in rented spaces, it felt like we were guests. After Mass everyone went home quickly. But here, in our own church, we stay, we talk, we share food and stories." Another recalled, "Before, it was difficult to organize parish activities. Now everything is centered here. Meetings, choir practice, catechesis—this building brings us together."

In these testimonies, communion is not reduced to the liturgical moment alone; it is experienced as a web of shared practices that requires spatial continuity. The building makes it possible for parishioners to recognize one another, to linger after Mass, to coordinate ministries, and to enact everyday solidarity (visiting the sick, accompanying

families, preparing celebrations). A stable place gathers bodies and time into repeatable patterns—weekly worship, weekday meetings, and informal encounters—so that fellowship takes on durability and depth. Without the building, communion felt temporary and easily dispersed; with it, relationships accumulate, ministries become sustainable, and the sense of being "one body" becomes more tangible.

Essence statement: the church building functions as the spatial heart of communion, turning a dispersed set of attenders into a more continuous community of mutual care and shared ministry.

Theme 3: Security and Stability

Experiential core: the church building is experienced as relief from displacement—an assurance that worship and communal life will not be interrupted, revoked, or endlessly relocated.

For many parishioners, worship in borrowed or rented spaces carried a background anxiety. One parishioner described it plainly: "Before, every time we had Mass, I worried—will this hall still be available next week? Will we be asked to leave? Now, with our own church, I can pray peacefully, without fear." Another extended the meaning into a generational horizon: "It feels different when you know the place belongs to us. I no longer think about moving or searching. I know this is our home, and it will be here for our children."

Stability here is not merely logistical convenience; it restructures the temporal texture of parish life. When the place of worship is uncertain, the future is experienced as provisional: planning remains fragile, ministries are harder to sustain, and prayer can be shadowed by anticipatory worry. The church building alters this structure by enabling the community to dwell—quietly, repeatedly, and with confidence—within a space that endures. Parishioners describe a shift from restlessness to calm, from dependence on external permission to rootedness, and from short-term arrangements to confidence about the future.

Essence statement: the church building secures a minority community's capacity to dwell, replacing the insecurity of "being moved" with the assurance of continuity.

Theme 4: Sacred Atmosphere and Solemnity

Experiential core: the church building is experienced as a perceptible sacred atmosphere that shapes embodied attention—disposing parishioners toward reverence, recollection, and prayer.

Parishioners repeatedly described the difference between "ordinary rooms" and a space set apart for God. One reflected, "When we celebrated Mass in the hall, it felt just like any other event. But here, in our own church, the atmosphere is holy. The cross, the altar, the silence—they help me feel God's presence." Another noted, "When I see the tabernacle lamp, I know Christ is here. It makes me want to stay and pray."

These accounts are strongly sensory: silence, light, spatial arrangement, and sacred symbols function as cues that reorient perception from everyday distraction toward worship. In phenomenological terms, the building reorders intentionality by directing attention—through altar, tabernacle, symbols, and silence—toward God as the one to whom prayer is addressed. In temporary venues, sacred action could occur, but the surrounding atmosphere often remained ambiguous or noisy; reverence required sustained effort against the grain of the place. In the church building, by contrast, the environment itself participates in meaning-making: it supports a slower pace, encourages gestures of respect, and invites recollection even before words are spoken. The building becomes a threshold between ordinary life and worship, making solemnity easier to inhabit.

Essence statement: the church building is experienced as sacred atmosphere; it mediates how parishioners perceive, behave, and pray, making reverence more readily inhabitable.

Theme 5: Homecoming and Fulfillment

Experiential core: the church building is experienced as arrival—homecoming after a long journey—where collective memory, perseverance, and hope are gathered into one place.

Parishioners narrated the completion of the church as the culmination of years of waiting, sacrifice, and prayer. One said, "When I first entered, I cried. This was the answer to our prayers, the fruit of our patience. Now I feel complete as part of this parish." Another expressed, "This is not just a building; it is the story of our struggle. Every wall tells of our sacrifices."

In these testimonies, the building concentrates time. It gathers the past (years of uncertainty and struggle), makes the present palpable (joy, gratitude, and pride), and opens a future (children and grandchildren growing up with a stable parish home). The meaning of "home" here is not private but communal: it is the sense that the parish now has a place where its life can be remembered, celebrated, and continued. Homecoming is therefore not simply the end of a struggle but a new mode of dwelling—marked by gratitude, responsibility, and renewed hope for the future of the parish.

Essence statement: the church building is experienced as fulfilled hope, a material arrival that gathers memory and future into a shared home for faith.

Synthesis across themes: Taken together, these themes describe a coherent trajectory rather than five unrelated observations. Visibility (Theme 1) gives the community a public "address," which supports durable communion (Theme 2). Stability (Theme 3) relieves the background insecurity that previously strained both worship and planning. Sacred atmosphere (Theme 4) shapes the embodied way parishioners pray and behave together, deepening the sense that this is not merely a venue but a place set apart. Homecoming (Theme 5) gathers these dimensions into an experience of arrival in which identity, communion, stability, and sacredness converge. In this way, the church building is consistently described as a lived ecclesial reality: it is experienced as what enables a minority community to be seen, to gather, to dwell, to pray, and to hope together.

DISCUSSION

Building directly on the theme-structures established in the Findings, this Discussion interprets the data rather than repeats it by moving through each theme in a disciplined two-step arc. First, it offers a phenomenological clarification of what is lived and how it becomes meaningful. Second, it places that meaning within Catholic theological and ecclesial tradition. To keep the argument lean, each theme is anchored by one primary phenomenological interlocutor and one principal ecclesial or theological touchstone, while broader socio-material and political considerations are noted only where they sharpen the analysis. The integrative synthesis then draws on Donald Wallenfang's category of paradox to show how "Church as People of God" and "church as building" are not rival claims, but mutually implicating dimensions of one lived ecclesial reality, before the chapter briefly acknowledges alternative lenses and derives pastoral implications from the overall five-theme trajectory.

Identity and Visibility

Experiential core (Results): the church building is experienced as recognition, a public "address" that allows the Catholic community to be seen, named, and acknowledged in the local lifeworld. Essence (Findings): the church building makes communal identity publicly inhabitable; it is experienced as the material condition by which a minority community becomes recognizable as a community.

Husserl's notion of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) helps clarify why parishioners describe the building as a shift from being "hidden" to being "seen."[30] Identity is not merely an inner conviction; it takes shape within a shared horizon of everyday meaning, in which a community can be located, named, and recognized.[31] When parish life is repeatedly conducted in borrowed venues, the community remains socially difficult to "place": it must continually explain itself and can be treated as provisional. The new church building functions as a stabilizing point in the lifeworld, enabling recognition to occur in ordinary encounters (inviting friends, answering neighbors' questions, giving children a place to name as "our church").

Recent scholarship on place and Christian sacred space sharpens the same point in a complementary vocabulary. Place is a thick, lived reality with a social dimension: it insinuates itself into a collectivity and quietly shapes how persons and communities become intelligible to one another. In modern conditions of mobility and placelessness, the fragility of place can unsettle identity and civic belonging, since to "find one's place" is also to locate oneself within a recognizable social order. Within this frame, a dedicated worship site can function as a durable public address: it communicates a community's presence to the surrounding neighborhood and teaches both insiders and outsiders how that community understands itself, without reducing ecclesial life to property or infrastructure.[32]

Catholic teaching frames this same movement in ecclesial terms. The Catechism notes that visible churches are not merely functional gathering places; they "signify and

[30] Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 103, 111–13.

[31] Husserl, *Crisis*, Appendix III, 328–32.

[32] Craig G. Bartholomew, *Where Mortals Dwell: A Christian View of Place for Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 3–4; Wilfred M. McClay and Ted V. McAllister, eds., *Why Place Matters: Geography, Identity, and Civic Life in Modern America* (New York: Encounter Books, 2014), 8–9; Jeanne Halgren Kilde, *Sacred Power, Sacred Space: An Introduction to Christian Architecture and Worship* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 3.

make visible" the Church living in a particular place, as a dwelling of God with people reconciled in Christ.[33] In Pinang Parish, this "visibility" is experienced as dignity: the community's belonging becomes publicly legible without reducing the Church to architecture. The building is thus not a competitor to "Church as People of God" but a material condition that renders communal ecclesial identity inhabitable within a contested social landscape.

Communion and Fellowship

Experiential core (Findings): the church building is experienced as a shared place that thickens relationships, stabilizes rhythms of gathering, and enables *koinonia* to take durable form. Essence (Results): the church building functions as the spatial heart of communion, turning a dispersed set of attenders into a more continuous community of mutual care and shared ministry.

Levinas's account of the face to face encounter and the ethical claim of the other helps clarify why parishioners repeatedly link communion to having "our own place."[34] Responsibility for the other does not emerge only from abstract ideals; it grows through repeated, embodied encounter, seeing familiar faces, lingering, serving, and being interrupted by concrete needs. In temporary venues, fellowship can happen, but it is structurally fragile: the gathering disperses quickly, ministries lack a stable center, and people remain easier to treat as strangers. A dedicated church stabilizes this continuity of encounter over time, so that mutual recognition and responsibility become sustainable practices rather than occasional sentiments.

Here, work in material religion is a helpful complementary lens. Religion is sustained within an ecology of bodies, objects, places, and repeated practices, and in many cases belief follows, and is carried by, practice rather than preceding it.[35] Read this way, a stable sacred place does not merely accommodate fellowship; it thickens koinonia by making shared routines more dependable and repeatable over time (arriving, greeting, serving, lingering), so that communion becomes more socially and materially livable.

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[33] *Catholic Church, Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1180.

[34] Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 194–200.

[35] David Morgan, *The Thing About Religion: An Introduction to the Material Study of Religions* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 2–3, 77.

Ecclesiology locates this lived koinonia within the Church's sacramental and liturgical life. Ratzinger repeatedly argues that ecclesial communion is not self-generated sociability; it is communion formed as the assembly is called together and ordered toward God in worship, most concretely enacted around the altar.[36] Pinang parishioners' accounts of staying after Mass, coordinating ministries, and caring for one another show how a stable sacred place can thicken the communal bonds that the liturgy both presupposes and renews.

Security and Stability

Experiential core (Findings): the church building is experienced as relief from displacement, an assurance that worship and communal life will not be interrupted, revoked, or endlessly relocated. Essence (Results): the church building secures a minority community's capacity to dwell, replacing the insecurity of "being moved" with the assurance of continuity.

Heidegger's reflections on building and dwelling illuminate why parishioners describe the move from rented halls to a church building as a shift from restlessness to peace. To dwell is to inhabit a world with a sense of rootedness and continuity.[37] When worship is constantly contingent on others' permission, the community's temporal horizon becomes provisional: planning is fragile, ministries are harder to sustain, and prayer can be shadowed by anticipatory worry. A church building enables a mode of dwelling in which the community can return, repeat, and remain, so that stability is experienced not simply as convenience but as a condition for faithful continuity.

This stability also bears a distinctive weight in Indonesia's minority context, where obtaining or maintaining a permit can become a long, contested process. Recent Indonesian sociological analysis of the GKI Yasmin Bogor conflict shows how minority worship can remain precarious through the interplay of structural decisions, cultural pressure, and ongoing contestation, producing exclusion even when formal procedures are pursued. Read alongside the regulatory logic of the 2006 Joint Ministerial Decree on houses of worship, the Pinang parishioners' language of "relief," "calm," and "peace"

[36] Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, 78–79, 86.

[37] Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2010), 144–45.

signals more than logistical resolution: it reflects the easing of a structurally produced vulnerability that can accompany minority worship under contested approval regimes.[38]

Lefebvre's account of space as a social product helps sharpen this point: space is not a neutral container but an outcome of social and political ordering, and it is often partitioned into "assigned" places and "prohibited" places, with many prohibitions operating in socially "invisible" ways.[39]

The Catechism explicitly connects church buildings to the Church's pilgrim life by calling them signs of the Father's house toward which the People of God journey. [40] For Pinang Parish, the building becomes a concrete assurance of continuity that supports worship, planning, and generational hope, without claiming to secure the Church's mystery by stone alone.

Sacred Atmosphere and Solemnity

Experiential core (Findings): the church building is experienced as a perceptible sacred atmosphere that shapes embodied attention and disposes parishioners toward reverence, recollection, and prayer. Essence (Results): the church building is experienced as sacred atmosphere; it mediates how parishioners perceive, behave, and pray, making reverence more readily inhabitable.

Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied perception clarifies why parishioners describe the building as "teaching" reverence. Perception is not purely mental; it is formed through bodily orientation, gesture, rhythm, and the cues offered by a place. [41] In temporary halls, sacred action can occur, but the atmosphere often remains ambiguous: noise, ordinary signage, and multi-purpose arrangements make recollection harder to inhabit. In the dedicated church, symbols, silence, and spatial order reorient the body by

[38] Budi Chrismanto Sirait, "Ancaman Diskriminasi Minoritas dan Hilangnya Multikulturalisme di Indonesia: Studi Kasus Penutupan GKI Yasmin Bogor," *Politika: Jurnal Ilmu Politik* 10, no. 1 (2019): 28, 32, 35, https://doi.org/10.14710/politika.10.1.2019.28-39; *Peraturan Bersama Menteri* 2006, Bab IV "Pendirian Rumah Ibadat," Pasal 13–14; Andreas Harsono, "Indonesia's 'Religious Harmony' Regulation Brings Anything But Harmony," *Human Rights Watch*, April 11, 2020, https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/11/indonesias-religious-harmony-regulation-brings-anything.

[39] Henri Lefebvre, *La producción del espacio*, intro and trans. Emilio Martínez Gutiérrez (Madrid: Capitán Swing Libros, 2013), 86, 193, 239 and 269.

[40] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1186.

[41] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (New York: Routledge, 2012), 176, 180, 504.

slowing speech, inviting kneeling, and making attention toward God more readily sustained.

Recent liturgical-theological reflection on formation strengthens this interpretive move: the church's spatial and ritual environment does not merely support prayer but participates in shaping the faithful through the symbolic language of the body in space and time, so that recollection, silence, and reverence become habitual rather than episodic.[42]

Sacrosanctum Concilium frames this pedagogical role of space by insisting that sacred art and furnishings should foster devotion and direct the faithful toward God, pursuing "noble beauty" rather than mere display.[43] When Pinang parishioners speak of the cross, altar, and tabernacle lamp as shaping prayer, they are describing precisely this liturgical formation of perception. The building is experienced as more than a container for rites; it becomes part of how the assembly learns reverence, how worship becomes bodily, communal, and sustained.

Homecoming and Fulfillment

Experiential core (Results): the church building is experienced as arrival, a homecoming after a long journey, where collective memory, perseverance, and hope are gathered into one place. Essence (Results): the church building is experienced as fulfilled hope, a material arrival that gathers memory and future into a shared home for faith.

Husserl's analysis of temporality helps clarify why "arrival" is experienced as more than a present emotion.[44] Parishioners narrate the building as a convergence of retention (years of waiting, sacrifice, and uncertainty), protention (longing for a stable home), and fulfillment (the moment when hope becomes tangible). In this sense, the building concentrates time: it carries memory, intensifies present gratitude, and opens a future for children and grandchildren. Homecoming is therefore communal rather than

[42] Francis, Apostolic Letter *Desiderio desideravi* (June 29, 2022), nos. 19 and 36, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html; United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Built of Living Stones: Art, Architecture, and Worship* (Washington, DC: USCCB, 2000), §221, https://www.arlingtondiocese.org/uploadedImages/CDA/Assets/PDF/Planning%20Construction%20and%20Facilities/USCCB%20Built%20of%20Living%20Stones%20Art%20Architecture%20and%20Worship.pdf.

[43] Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 122–124.

[44] Edmund Husserl, *The Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*, trans. James S. Churchill (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1964), 109–110.

private; it is an ecclesial "we" that now has a place where its story can be remembered and continued.

Catholic tradition interprets such homecoming through the Church's concrete, local embodiment. By stating that visible churches signify the Church living 'in this place', the Catechism implicitly links ecclesial identity to a localized form of dwelling.[45] Pinang parishioners' language of tears, joy, and 'finally having a home' can be read as a lived ecclesiological claim: a community becomes publicly and temporally sustainable when its worship and memory have a stable home in which to gather.

Integrative Synthesis: The Paradox of Church and church

Read together, the five themes describe one coherent meaning-structure: visibility (a public address) supports communion (durable koinonia); communion requires stability (the capacity to dwell without fear of being moved); stability is deepened by sacred atmosphere (a place that forms embodied reverence); and these dimensions converge in homecoming (fulfilled hope gathered into a communal home). This trajectory clarifies why the Pinang case should not be framed as a choice between 'Church as People' and 'church as building.' For these parishioners, the building does not replace the Church; it is how the Church becomes publicly inhabitable and durably gatherable in a minority context.

Wallenfang's category of paradox helps articulate this inseparability without collapsing one side into the other.[46] A church building is materially ordinary and yet ecclesially "more." It is visible stone oriented toward an invisible mystery, a finite place that bears sacramental meaning. In Pinang Parish, paradox is not an abstract theory imposed on the data; it names what parishioners already express when they speak of the church as both "our house" and a place where God dwells with his people. The building becomes a visible sign of belonging precisely because it points beyond itself, toward the communion it gathers and the God toward whom that communion is ordered.

Limits and Alternative Lenses

This interpretation foregrounds phenomenological and ecclesiological meaning, but other lenses remain possible and can complement rather than negate the account

[45] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1180.
[46] Wallenfang, *Phenomenology*, chap. 4, "Paradox," sec. "Paradox."

offered here. A material religion approach would stress how objects, architecture, and spatial practices shape belief and belonging through everyday habits, and how "church" becomes lived through material cues, routines, and bodily dispositions as much as through explicit doctrine.[47] A socio-legal and political reading would emphasize the church building as a claim to civic recognition under a permit regime that can render minority worship precarious, highlighting how public visibility is negotiated through regulation, local contestation, and institutional gatekeeping.[48] These perspectives remind us that the meanings articulated by parishioners arise at the intersection of faith, material practice, and public power.

Pastoral and Diocesan Implications

The five themes suggest practical implications for pastoral leadership in minority contexts. First, formation in ecclesiology should explicitly integrate 'Church as People of God' with the formative role of sacred space, so that devotion to a building does not become building-centered but remains communion-centered. Second, because stability and visibility carry particular weight where permits are contested, diocesan accompaniment should include legal-advocacy support and long-term pastoral care for communities worshipping in temporary venues. Third, the experience of sacred atmosphere indicates that architectural and liturgical decisions (silence, symbols, spatial order) have catechetical force; they form prayer and reverence over time. Finally, homecoming as fulfilled hope invites the parish to remember the struggle not as triumphalism but as a renewed vocation to hospitality, reconciliation, and mission within the wider neighborhood.

In sum, the Pinang case shows that the church building is experienced as recognition, communion, dwelling, sacred formation, and fulfilled hope. Phenomenology clarifies how these meanings arise in lived experience; ecclesiology locates them within the Church's understanding of local embodiment and sacramental life; and Wallenfang's

[47] Birgit Meyer et al., "The Origin and Mission of Material Religion," *Religion* 40, no. 3 (2010): 207–211, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.religion.2010.01.010.

[48] Melissa Crouch, "Regulating Places of Worship in Indonesia," *Singapore Journal of Legal Studies* (2007): 97, 109–110, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24869039; Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia Republik Indonesia, *Pengkajian Komnas HAM RI atas Peraturan Bersama Menteri No. 9 dan 8 Tahun 2006 terkait Pendirian Rumah Ibadah* (Jakarta: Komnas HAM RI, 2020), ii, 54, 57–58; Komisi Nasional Hak Asasi Manusia Republik Indonesia, *Evaluasi Implementasi Peraturan Bersama Menteri 2006 dalam Pendirian Rumah Ibadat* (Jakarta: Komnas HAM RI, 2025), ii–iii, 16–17.

paradox names the structural tension by which the visible can bear what exceeds visibility. Taken together, the themes support the claim that the 'paradox of Church and church' is not a problem to eliminate but a lived ecclesial reality through which a minority community becomes visible, gatherable, and sustained in faith.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how Catholic parishioners of Pinang Parish in Tangerang, within the Archdiocese of Jakarta, experience and interpret the meaning of a church building after decades of worship in temporary venues. Across the interviews, five interrelated themes, identity and visibility, communion and fellowship, security and stability, sacred atmosphere and solemnity, and homecoming and fulfillment, show that the building is not treated as a merely functional facility but as a lived ecclesial reality that publicly locates the community, thickens its bonds, steadies its worship, forms reverent attention, and gathers collective memory and hope.

Read theologically, these themes sharpen an ecclesiological point: in minority settings, the distinction between Church as the People of God and church as building is not a simple either-or. The community becomes publicly inhabitable through a material place where gathering can be repeated, remembered, and sustained. Phenomenological description clarifies why this matters, including recognition in the lifeworld, the capacity to dwell without fear of displacement, and the embodied formation of prayer. Ecclesial tradition, in turn, names the building as a sign that serves the Church's sacramental life rather than replacing it. In this sense, the Pinang church building functions as a visible bearer of an invisible communion, as stone that makes a community gatherable. Theoretically, the study contributes to phenomenology, ecclesiology, and sacred architecture by offering a bottom-up account of how sacred space operates as a meaning-structure that links lifeworld recognition, the capacity to dwell, and embodied prayer to ecclesial self-understanding in contested contexts.

The Pinang case also suggests practical implications. First, parish catechesis and formation can explicitly integrate ecclesiology and sacred space: the building should be taught as serving communion, liturgy, and mission, so that devotion remains people-centered and Christ-oriented rather than building-centered. Second, diocesan and parish leadership should accompany communities that worship in temporary venues with sustained pastoral care by attending to fatigue, insecurity, and conflict wounds that

accumulate during prolonged uncertainty, and by providing prudent forms of legal and civic advocacy when needed. Concretely, this may include diocesan guidance on documentation and permit procedures, sustained communication with local authorities and interfaith forums, and a disciplined practice of transparency and neighbor engagement to reduce suspicion and prevent escalation. Third, once a church is obtained, the parish can frame visibility as a missionary practice, namely a public presence that expresses hospitality, service, and neighborliness, resists triumphalism, and allows the church building to become a sign of peace for its surroundings.

This study has limitations. It is a single-case qualitative inquiry with purposive sampling (n=17), so it does not claim statistical generalization; its value lies in thick description and conceptual transferability to comparable minority contexts. Future research could compare multiple parishes across regions, examine how meanings shift over time (before and after a church is built), and include perspectives of neighboring communities and local officials to better understand how sacred space is negotiated socially and politically. Such comparative work would also clarify how the Pinang experience resonates with wider global struggles over contested worship spaces, including minority Christian communities facing restrictive building policies and other religious minorities whose public visibility remains disputed. Even within these limits, the witness of Pinang Parish indicates that, where worship space is contested, the struggle for a church building is experienced not as an external add-on to faith but as a concrete arena in which ecclesial belonging, perseverance, and joy are lived.

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