

Living as Sojourners: Faith Formation among Indonesian Christian Diaspora in Malaysia

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Abstract: Research in Christian Religious Education (CRE) has shown that faith formation extends beyond formal instruction to the communal life of the church. However, empirical evidence on how non-formal CRE shapes faith formation within Southeast Asian Christian diaspora communities remains limited. This qualitative case study examined how Bethel Church Malaysia (BCM) Johor Bahru fostered faith formation among Indonesian Christian migrants. Data were collected through three months of participant observation (November 2025 to April 2026), semi-structured interviews with nine purposively selected participants – seven congregation members and two church leaders – and analysed using thematic analysis. The findings identified three interconnected dimensions of non-formal CRE: contemplative rootedness through biblical devotional practices, communal belonging through faith-based relationships, and civic witness through culturally engaged participation in the host society. These dimensions emerged from the congregation's everyday communal life and were interpreted through 1 Peter 2:11–12, which frames believers as sojourners and exiles, while Jeremiah 29:7 informed their understanding of civic responsibility. The study concludes that diaspora congregations function as intentional environments of non-formal CRE that strengthen spiritual identity, communal resilience, and public witness. It proposes an empirically grounded model of diaspora faith formation with practical implications for Christian ministry and religious education in migrant communities across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Christian Religious Education; diaspora; faith formation; Indonesian Christian migrants; non-formal Christian education

Abstrak: Penelitian dalam bidang Pendidikan Agama Kristen (PAK) menunjukkan bahwa pembentukan iman tidak hanya berlangsung melalui pembelajaran formal, tetapi juga melalui kehidupan komunal gereja. Namun, bukti empiris mengenai bagaimana PAK non-formal membentuk iman pada komunitas diaspora Kristen di Asia Tenggara masih terbatas. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana Bethel Church Malaysia (BCM) Johor Bahru membangun pembentukan iman di kalangan migran Kristen Indonesia. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan studi kasus kualitatif melalui observasi partisipatif (November 2025 hingga April 2026), wawancara semi-terstruktur terhadap sembilan partisipan terpilih – tujuh anggota jemaat dan dua pemimpin gereja. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian mengidentifikasi tiga dimensi yang saling berkaitan dalam PAK non-formal, yaitu keberakaran kontemplatif melalui praktik devosional Alkitabiah, kepemilikan komunal melalui relasi berbasis iman, dan kesaksian publik melalui partisipasi yang terlibat secara budaya dalam masyarakat setempat. Ketiga dimensi tersebut berkembang melalui kehidupan komunal jemaat sehari-hari dan ditafsirkan berdasarkan 1 Petrus 2:11–12, yang menggambarkan orang percaya sebagai pendatang dan perantau, sementara Yeremia 29:7 memberikan landasan bagi pemahaman tentang tanggung jawab sosial. Penelitian ini menyimpulkan bahwa gereja diaspora berfungsi sebagai lingkungan PAK nonformal yang secara sengaja memperkuat identitas spiritual, ketahanan komunitas, dan kesaksian publik. Penelitian ini juga menawarkan model empiris pembentukan iman berbasis diaspora yang memberikan implikasi praktis bagi pelayanan gereja dan Pendidikan Agama Kristen pada komunitas migran di Asia Tenggara.

Kata kunci: *pembentukan iman; Pendidikan Agama Kristen; pendidikan non-formal; pekerja migran; spiritualitas diaspora*

Introduction

International migration increasingly shapes religious identity and communal life. More than 281 million people now live outside their country of birth (International Organization for Migration) (IOM, 2024), and for many Christians migration means negotiating faith as a minority in culturally and religiously different societies (Hanciles, 2021; Phan, 2013). Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia exemplify this condition. They form one of the country's largest migrant populations, with substantial concentrations in Johor Bahru, where many work in manufacturing, construction, plantations, and domestic service (Arisman & Jaya, 2020; BP2MI, 2023). Rotating shifts, long working hours, employer restrictions, and legal precarity limit their ability to take part in regular church programmes (Prasetya et al., 2021; Utami, 2023). In Malaysia, where Islam is the religion of the Federation and Christians form a minority, public religious expression is also a sensitive matter, which gives the civic dimension of migrant faith particular significance.

The question of how faith is formed under such conditions is not new to Christian Religious Education (CRE). Nelson (1984) argued that faith is communicated by a community of believers through socialisation, and Westerhoff (2012) contrasted a schooling-instructional paradigm with a community of faith-enculturation paradigm. Groome's (1991) shared Christian praxis and Moran's (1989) broad conception of religious education likewise locate formation in the reflective life of the community rather than in instruction alone. The community-of-faith paradigm is therefore well established in theory. In practice, however, Indonesian diaspora congregations often reproduce programme models inherited from churches in Indonesia, such as Sunday schools, age-graded fellowships, and scheduled Bible classes, which presuppose stable time, residence, and membership. The gap addressed here is thus not the absence of a community-based theory but the limited understanding of how that paradigm operates, and what it must become, when migrant workers cannot sustain programme-based participation.

Research on immigrant religion consistently shows that congregations function as communities of belonging, support, and faith formation. Ebaugh and Chafetz (2000) demonstrated how immigrant congregations sustain and adapt religious traditions, while Levitt (2007) highlighted migrants' transnational religious lives across home and host societies. In Asia, Cruz (2010) emphasized faith-based resilience amid the struggles of Filipina domestic workers in Hong Kong. Indonesian scholarship, however, has focused largely on migrant labour conditions (Arisman & Jaya, 2020), legal protection (Utami, 2023), and worship as a discipleship strategy in a Malaysian diaspora church (Prasetya et al., 2021). While these studies illuminate belonging, transnationalism, and pastoral care, they give limited attention to everyday congregational life as a form of intentional religious education, particularly among temporary contract workers in Southeast Asia whose social, legal, and economic circumstances remain provisional.

Coombs and Ahmed's (1974) distinction between formal, non-formal, and informal education offers a useful lens for this gap. Non-formal education refers to organised, intentional learning outside formal institutions. Applied to CRE, it directs attention to worship, mentoring, fellowship, and pastoral accompaniment as deliberate, if unschooled, formative practices (Dykstra, 2005). Scholarship on lived religion similarly locates religious identity in everyday

practices and relationships (Ammerman, 2007), and Indonesian CRE research has called for contextual pedagogies that connect learning with learners' lived spiritual experience (Boiliu & Telaumbanua, 2022; Gulo & Tapilaha, 2024; Zai & Larosa, 2024).

Responding to this gap, this article examines faith formation at Bethel Church Malaysia (BCM) Johor Bahru, a Pentecostal-Charismatic congregation serving Indonesian migrants, asking how faith is sustained when programme-based CRE is constrained. The findings are interpreted through 1 Peter 2:11–12 and Jeremiah 29:4–7, framing migrants as *sojourners* called to faithful presence in their host society. The study contributes empirically by showing how the community-of-faith model adapts to labour migration and conceptually by proposing provisional rootedness as a framework connecting identity, community, and public witness among believers living in temporary circumstances.

Method

This study employed a qualitative case study to examine BCM Johor Bahru as a site of non-formal Christian Religious Education (CRE) among Indonesian Christian migrants. This design was chosen to explore faith formation as a lived, contextually embedded phenomenon rather than for statistical generalisation (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Yin, 2018). BCM was purposively selected because it primarily serves Indonesian migrant workers and their families within a Pentecostal-Charismatic setting and includes members from diverse Indonesian ethnic backgrounds. Figure 1 summarises the research design.

Fieldwork was conducted from November 2025 to April 2026 through participant observation and semi structured interviews. Observation covered Sunday services, cell groups, discipleship and ministry gatherings, and the Visit Johor 2026 Cultural Night. Nine active participants, five church leaders and four lay members, were interviewed between January and March 2026, with sampling continuing until sufficient information power was reached (Malterud et al., 2016). Interviews were conducted in Indonesian, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim, focusing on faith before and after migration, participation barriers, sustaining practices, and the church's social role. The National Prayer and Cultural Night (16 September 2025), which preceded fieldwork, was reconstructed from interviews, documents, and an earlier study (Prasetya et al., 2025). Table 2 summarises the data sources for each theme.

The data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. After repeated reading of transcripts and field notes, meaningful statements were coded inductively, grouped into categories, and refined through constant comparison into three themes. Coding was carried out by the first and third authors, who are not members of BCM, and was discussed by the whole team. Theological interpretation began only after the themes had been developed, so that the biblical texts served as an interpretive lens rather than as a coding frame.

Trustworthiness followed Lincoln and Guba (1985). Credibility was supported by prolonged engagement, triangulation of observation, interview, and documentary data, and member checking, in which summaries of the preliminary themes were shared with participants for comment. Dependability and confirmability were supported by reflexive journaling and team discussion, and transferability by contextual description.

Table 1. Research Design

Section	Content	Details	
1. DESIGN	Qualitative Single Case Study	Practical-theological design	
Case	Bethel Church Malaysia (BCM) Johor Bahru	Pentecostal-Charismatic congregation serving Indonesian migrants	
Section	Setting	Participants (n = 9)	
2. SETTING & PARTICIPANTS	1. Sunday services 2. Cell groups 3. Discipleship/ministry gatherings	1. Purposive sampling: ≥ 6 months active 2. Church leaders (AWs, IDN, LS, SL, TS) 3. 4 lay members (ES, KS, RZ, YL) 4. Information power (Malterud et al., 2016)	
Section	Participant Observation	Semi-structured Interviews	Documents
3. DATA COLLECTION	Nov 2025 – Apr 2026Field notes on worship, cell groups, ministry and public events	Jan – Mar 2026In IndonesianAudio-recorded, transcribed verbatim	PGBM event etc.Collected Sep 2025
Section	Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)		
4. ANALYSIS	Familiarisation → Coding → Searching themes → Reviewing → Defining & naming → Reporting		
Quality / Validation	Triangulation Member checking Reflexive journaling Team discussion		
Section	Three Interrelated Themes		
5. FINDINGS & INTERPRETATION	1. Reconstructing Spiritual Identity as Sojourners 2. Becoming a Faith Community through Shared Life 3. Living Faith through Public Witness		
Interpretation	Interpreted through 1 Peter 2:11–12 and Jeremiah 29:4–7 → <i>pedagogy of provisional rootedness</i>		

Note. All participants had been active in BCM for at least six months. Codes are initials used with consent.

The authors' positionality requires explicit acknowledgement. All authors are affiliated with Real Theological Institute, Batam, which maintains ministry ties with Indonesian-speaking churches in Johor Bahru. The second author (AMS) serves in leadership at BCM and was also interviewed as a key informant, and three of the authors previously studied the same congregation and its Cultural Night (Prasetya et al., 2025). This insider position facilitated access and trust but also created risks of confirmation bias and of presenting the congregation favourably. To reduce these risks, AMS was interviewed by another team member and did not code any transcripts, and his account was used mainly for contextual information and only where it was corroborated by other participants or field notes. Interviews with the other

participants were conducted by the fourth author. Quotations were translated from Indonesian into English by the authors and checked by a bilingual colleague.

Table 2. Participant Profile

Code	Role in BCM	Interview date
AMS	Church leader (second author; see positionality)	22 January 2026
IDH	Pastoral leader	7 March 2026
LS	Pastoral leader	7 March 2026
SL	Pastoral leader	15 February 2026
TS	Pastoral leader	6 March 2026
ES	Lay member	8 February 2026
KS	Lay member	3 March 2026
RZ	Lay member	14 January 2026
YL	Lay member	17 March 2026

Ethical approval was granted by the Research Ethics Committee of Real Theological Institute, Batam (STT-REAL/ETHICS/2025). Written informed consent was obtained, participants were free to withdraw at any time, and all data were anonymised and stored in password-protected files.

Table 3. Data Sources by Theme

Theme	Main data sources
Reconstructing spiritual identity as sojourners	Interviews (all participants); field notes from services and cell groups
Becoming a faith community through shared life	Interviews; field notes from cell groups, shared meals, and ministry preparation
Living faith through public witness	Observation of the 14 December 2025 Cultural Night; interviews (AMS, RZ, TS, YL); event documents and Prasetya et al. (2025) for the 16 September 2025 event

Result

Faith Formation under Structural Constraints

Observation showed that faith formation at BCM took place amid demanding work schedules, mobility, and limited access to formal programmes. Members often came to services and cell groups directly after factory shifts or domestic work, while some attended only irregularly because of rotating schedules or employer obligations. The congregation therefore held worship, discipleship, and small-group meetings in the evenings and at weekends. Participants named irregular hours, long shifts, transport, and employer demands as the main obstacles to Sunday school, Bible classes, and other structured programmes. SL, a pastoral leader, recalled: *“Back in Indonesia, my church had Sunday school, youth fellowship, and women’s ministry. When I came here, I had to learn my faith all over again, but regular classes were not always possible. Instead, I learned from the people around me and from what we experienced together”* (S.L., 2026). AMS explained that the leadership had deliberately moved

from programme-centred instruction to relational discipleship because the programme model brought from Indonesian churches was often inaccessible to migrant workers (A.M.S., 2026).

These accounts also contain tension. SL described an initial period of spiritual disorientation, and observation showed that participation fluctuated with work rosters. Because all interviewees had remained active for at least six months, the data show how faith was sustained among those who stayed; they cannot show how migrants who withdrew from church life experienced the same constraints.

Reconstructing Spiritual Identity as Sojourners

The first theme concerns how participants came to reinterpret migration as more than an economic necessity. This reinterpretation took place less through formal teaching than through recurring practices of prayer, Scripture reading, worship, testimony, and shared reflection in services and cell groups. LS described separation from family as a process that deepened reliance on God: *“Faith could not depend on church programmes alone. I had to learn to grow spiritually wherever God placed me, together with brothers and sisters who faced the same struggles”* (L.S., 2026). YL recounted how personal prayer gradually widened from family and work to include the workplace, Johor Bahru, and its people as places where God had called believers to serve. Field notes recorded that biblical reflection in cell groups regularly connected Scripture with workplace pressure, family separation, and cultural adjustment (Y.L., 2026). AMS explained that discipleship aimed to help members interpret loneliness and occupational stress through Scripture and communal dialogue (A.M.S., 2026), and TS observed that many members experienced their most significant growth through prayer, ministry, and shared testimony rather than through classes (T.S., 2026).

Identity reconstruction thus functioned as the foundational process of faith formation within BCM Johor Bahru, through which migrant believers learned to see themselves not merely as workers abroad but as “sojourners and exiles” (1 Pet. 2:11–12) and as believers placed in Johor Bahru for a theological purpose. The congregation therefore functioned as a formative community in which prayer, worship, Scripture, testimony, and communal reflection enabled participants to reinterpret their migrant experience in dialogue with the Christian story. This finding is consistent with Groome’s (1991) concept of shared Christian praxis, in which present experience is brought into dialogue with the Christian story, and with Smith’s (2016) understanding of formation through repeated communal practices. It also resonates with Hanciles’ (2021) view of migration as a context for discipleship, Phan’s (2013) interpretation of diaspora identity as theological vocation, and Pentecostal perspectives that emphasise pastoral accompaniment and communal discipleship as essential to spiritual maturity (Ceria et al., 2021). Consequently, identity reconstruction was not merely an internal process but was cultivated through intentional communal practices that enabled migrant believers to reconstruct their spiritual identity, develop a sense of theological vocation, and cultivate resilient discipleship within the diaspora.

Becoming a Faith Community through Shared Life

The second theme describes how relationships became the main environment of formation. Observation showed that much learning took place around formal events: before and after services, in cell groups, over shared meals, during ministry preparation, and in informal conversations in which members prayed for and encouraged one another. KS contrasted this with churches at home: *“Back home there were many church programmes, but here we have fewer. Because of that, we depend more on one another. We learn through praying together, sharing our struggles, and encouraging each other”* (K.S., 2026). IDH described the congregation as a family: *“We know each other’s struggles, and when someone is having difficulties, we pray and help one another. That is where my faith has grown”* (I.D.H., 2026). ES similarly noted that mutual support sustained members through demanding work schedules (E.S., 2026). LS and TS likewise described companionship in shared ministry, rather than instruction, as the setting in which they had grown most (L.S., 2026; T.S., 2026).

Cell groups served as the principal educational setting and the primary pedagogical mechanism of non-formal Christian Religious Education within BCM Johor Bahru, where Scripture was interpreted alongside members’ lived experiences of financial obligations, family separation, cultural adaptation, and life in diaspora. Through pastoral conversations, mutual care, shared worship, and participation in ministry, leaders mentored members while participants learned through relationships and communal involvement, making communal participation itself a process of faith formation. This supports Westerhoff’s (2012) understanding that faith is learned through participation in a believing community, Wenger’s (1998) concept of communities of practice, Siagian’s (2023) emphasis on holistic discipleship, and Dykstra’s (2005) view of hospitality and shared practices as formative ecclesial disciplines. It also resonates with Pentecostal perspectives that regard pastoral accompaniment as an ongoing educational practice (Duha & Marpaung, 2024). Importantly, the prominence of community was not simply a deliberate replacement of formal programmes; rather, it emerged partly because imported programme models could not be sustained within the migrant context. In this sense, BCM’s communal life demonstrates that participation in a diaspora church is simultaneously a theological and pedagogical process: the congregation became a space where believers, understood through 1 Peter 2:11–12 as “sojourners and exiles,” cultivated belonging, strengthened spiritual resilience, and learned to embody their faith through shared life and public witness.

Living Faith through Public Witness

The third theme concerns the expression of faith beyond the congregation. Two events illustrate it. On 16 September 2025, before the fieldwork began, the Persekutuan Gereja-Gereja Berbahasa Malaysia (PGBM) organised a National Prayer and Cultural Night (*Doa Bangsa dan Malam Kebudayaan*) which, according to AMS and event documents, brought together about 750 young people from eleven Indonesian-speaking churches for intercessory prayer for Indonesia and Malaysia and for cultural performances (A.M.S., 2026) (see also Prasetya et al., 2025). On 14 December 2025, BCM performed the Batak Tor-Tor dance at a Cultural Night held as part of the Visit Johor 2026 launch (Batam, 2025), an event observed directly by the

research team. The team also observed the rehearsals leading up to the performance. Field notes indicate that members approached the performance as an opportunity to present themselves publicly as Christians and to build relationships with other churches and local communities.

Participants interpreted such involvement as vocation rather than cultural duty. YL said that the Cultural Night showed that Christians could contribute positively to society while remaining faithful to Christ (Y.L., 2026); TS regarded community service as part of discipleship (T.S., 2026); and RZ reflected that serving outside the church had deepened personal faith because witness is shown in daily life (R.Z., 2026). AMS emphasised that the church encouraged members to contribute beyond ethnic and church boundaries through honest work, good relationships, and community participation (A.M.S., 2026). Public witness therefore appeared as the outward expression of identity and belonging, although this evidence rests largely on leaders' framing and on two large events rather than on members' everyday civic practice.

Discussion

Reading the Themes through 1 Peter 2:11–12 and Jeremiah 29:4–7

Peter addresses his readers as *paroikoi* and *parepidēmoi* (1 Pet. 2:11), terms denoting resident aliens and temporary visitors. Commentators debate whether these terms describe the readers' social status (Elliott, 1981) or primarily their theological identity as God's people (Achtemeier, 2016; Jobes, 2005), but they broadly agree that the letter uses the language of exile, including "diaspora" (1:1) and "Babylon" (5:13), to shape a distinctive communal identity (Horrell, 2008; Michaels, 1988). The three themes follow the movement of 2:11–12 closely: a renewed identity (2:11), sustained by a community described as a "spiritual house" and a "holy nation" (2:5, 9–10), issuing in honourable conduct observed by outsiders (2:12). The ethical content of that conduct also matters. Participants' emphasis on honest work and good relationships with employers and neighbours corresponds to the "good works" of 2:12, which Peter expects to be visible precisely because the readers are outsiders. For BCM members, whose position in Malaysia is literally that of temporary foreigners, the social and theological senses of *paroikia* converge.

Jeremiah 29:4–7 adds a dimension that 1 Peter assumes but does not develop. The letter was sent to Judeans deported to Babylon in 597 BCE, against prophets who promised a swift return (Jer. 28). Its instructions to build houses, plant gardens, marry, and have children presuppose a long residence, which the text later sets at seventy years (29:10). Within this horizon, the exiles are to seek the *shālôm* of the city to which God has sent them and to pray for it, because their own *shālôm* depends on it (Brueggemann, 1998; Smith-Christopher, 2002). The logic is one of settled, though involuntary, residence. Because 1 Peter itself names the place of writing "Babylon" (5:13), reading the letter alongside Jeremiah's instruction to the Babylonian exiles is not an arbitrary pairing but follows an intertextual horizon the letter already invites.

This logic does not transfer directly to Indonesian migrant workers. Unlike the Babylonian exiles, they migrated voluntarily for economic reasons, many hold temporary contracts without prospects of settlement, and their presence is regulated by employers and

immigration law. Their condition is closer to the *parepidēmoi* of 1 Peter than to Jeremiah's settlers. What does carry over is Jeremiah's refusal of two temptations: postponing faithful life until return, and withdrawing from the host society. The participants' practice suggests a posture that may be called provisional rootedness, namely seeking the welfare of Johor Bahru for as long as they are placed there, without assuming permanence. This reading also calls for caution. Interpreting migration as divine sending, as participants did, can dignify difficult lives, but it must not be used to legitimise exploitative labour conditions, a danger highlighted by theologies of migrant domestic work (Cruz, 2010). The Malaysian setting adds a further consideration. Where public religious expression is carefully regulated, witness through cultural performance, honest work, and cooperation is not a diluted form of mission but a contextually fitting one, consistent with Peter's expectation that conduct rather than confrontation will commend the faith (2:12).

Confirming and Extending the Community-of-Faith Paradigm

The findings largely confirm, in a new context, what Nelson (1984), Westerhoff (2012), Groome (1991), and Moran (1989) have long argued: faith is formed through participation in a community's shared life. The contribution of the BCM case lies not in discovering this paradigm but in showing how it operates under the structural constraints of labour migration. Three features stand out. First, the move to community-based formation was driven by necessity rather than pedagogical conviction, as the programme model inherited from Indonesian churches proved unworkable. Second, the congregation's Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality, with its emphasis on testimony, prayer, and pastoral accompaniment (Ceria et al., 2021; Duha & Marpaung, 2024), supplied portable practices that could be sustained in the fragmented time available to shift workers (Boiliu & Telaumbanua, 2022; Gulo & Tapilaha, 2024). Third, public witness emerged as part of formation rather than as an additional ministry, which extends the authors' earlier reading of the Cultural Night through Jeremiah 29:7 (Prasetya et al., 2025) by locating it within a broader process of identity and belonging. These features are shaped by BCM's tradition; a congregation with a liturgical or confessional pattern centred on catechesis might adapt to the same constraints differently. These observations resonate with research on immigrant congregations (Ebaugh & Chafetz, 2000; Levitt, 2007) but differ in one respect: BCM members are not settling immigrants building durable institutions but temporary workers whose congregation must form faith within limited time and uncertain residence.

The findings challenge the long-standing assumption that Christian Religious Education (CRE) depends primarily on structured programmes such as Sunday school, catechetical classes, Bible studies, and curriculum-based discipleship (Groome, 1991; Westerhoff, 2012). While these approaches remain valuable, the experiences of Indonesian Christian migrants in Johor Bahru demonstrate that meaningful faith formation can continue even when access to formal educational structures is constrained. Rather than weakening discipleship, the absence of regular programmes fostered a community-based model in which worship, shared life, pastoral accompaniment, mutual care, and public engagement became the primary contexts for spiritual growth.

A Pedagogy of Provisional Rootedness

Conceptually, provisional rootedness names a tension that neither the community-of-faith paradigm nor diaspora theology resolves on its own. Enculturation models assume a relatively stable community into which newcomers are gradually socialised (Nelson, 1984; Westerhoff, 2012), whereas migrant congregations experience constant turnover as members arrive, leave, and return according to labour contracts. Formation in such a setting cannot rely on long apprenticeship; it depends on practices that are brief, repeatable, and transferable, so that what is learned in Johor Bahru can travel with the believer to the next workplace or back to Indonesia. In this sense the congregation educates not only for belonging to a particular church but for faithfulness in movement. The biblical texts sharpen this point: 1 Peter locates identity in belonging to God's people rather than in a place, while Jeremiah insists that such identity must still take concrete, local form in seeking the welfare of the present city.

Drawing these strands together, the study proposes a pedagogy of provisional rootedness as a conceptual framework for non-formal CRE in migrant congregations. The structural constraints of migration form its starting condition. Identity formation, through prayer, Scripture, and testimony, enables migrants to interpret their presence theologically. Communal belonging, through cell groups, mutual care, and mentoring, sustains that identity and functions as the main curriculum. Public witness expresses identity and belonging in the host society and, in turn, reinforces them. The elements are reciprocal rather than strictly sequential. In this framework the congregation serves as the curriculum and shared life as the pedagogy, while the qualifier provisional keeps in view both the temporariness of migrant residence and the limits of a single case. For practice, the framework suggests that churches serving migrants should prioritise portable practices, lay mentoring, and flexible small groups over replicating home-church programmes, and should assess formation by identity, relationships, and public conduct as well as by programme attendance.

Implications for Christian Religious Education and Diaspora Ministry

This study suggests that the effectiveness of Christian Religious Education (CRE) in diaspora contexts should not be measured only by curriculum coverage, attendance, or doctrinal knowledge, but also by theological interpretation, communal belonging, mutual care, and public witness. Because migrant life is shaped by mobility, work schedules, and uncertain residence, sustainable faith formation depends on relational networks, pastoral accompaniment, mentoring, flexible cell groups, intercultural fellowship, and opportunities for civic engagement. These findings reinforce the importance of pastoral counselling, family formation, children's spiritual nurture, parental leadership, and transformational Christian leadership (Harefa et al., 2023; J. Pasaribu et al., 2025; Prasetya et al., 2024; Sanjaya et al., 2024; Simbolon & Widjaja, 2025; Tambun et al., 2018; Togatorop et al., 2021). Although based on one Indonesian diaspora congregation, the study offers analytical rather than statistical generalisation (Yin, 2018) and provides a framework potentially relevant to other mobile Christian communities. Ultimately, diaspora CRE is strengthened not primarily by reproducing institutional programmes, but by cultivating communities where believers grow in spiritual identity, communal belonging, and faithful public witness.

Conclusion

This study concludes that faith formation among Indonesian migrants at BCM Johor Bahru is sustained primarily through non-formal Christian Religious Education embedded in congregational life rather than through programmes imported from home churches. Through worship, relationships, pastoral accompaniment, shared practices, and public engagement, participants reconstructed their identity as sojourners, developed a sense of belonging within the migrant community, and expressed their faith through public witness. Read through the theological perspectives of 1 Peter 2:11–12 and Jeremiah 29:4–7, these findings reveal a pedagogy of provisional rootedness, in which believers learn to live faithfully within the temporary and mobile realities of migration. The study therefore demonstrates how established community-of-faith approaches to Christian education operate within the specific constraints of labour migration in Southeast Asia, while also showing how empirical study of a small migrant congregation can enrich practical theology. These conclusions should, however, be understood in light of the study's limitations, including its focus on one Pentecostal-Charismatic congregation, nine active participants, insider relationships between researchers and the congregation, and one public-witness event reconstructed retrospectively. Future research should broaden the scope through comparative and longitudinal studies across denominations and countries, including migrants who have disengaged from congregational life or experienced changes through return and onward migration.

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Competing Interests

The second author serves in leadership at BCM Johor Bahru and was interviewed as a key informant; how this relationship was managed is described in the Method section. The authors declare no other competing interests.

Author Contributions (CRediT)

Dewi Lidya Sidabutar: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Supervision, Formal analysis, Writing (original draft). Abraham Marsal Sakati: Investigation, Data curation, Resources, Validation. Winson Hermanto Simamora: Investigation, Resources, Validation, Writing (review and editing), Visualisation. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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Data Availability Statement

The data are not publicly available because of confidentiality commitments to participants. De-identified summary data are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the Research Ethics Committee of Real Theological Institute, Batam (STT-REAL/ETHICS/2025) and conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants.

Disclaimer

The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of Real Theological Institute, Batam.

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