Cristobal Tong interviewed by Bryan Yu
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Bryan Yu: And we are on. So, Chris. Introduce yourself. And what is your occupation? Like, what's your name to age? First language? How did you get to New York? And yeah.

Cristobal Tong: Okay. Wow, that's quite a quite a few questions at once. So, my name is Cristobal Tong, I am 35 this year. I am a pastor in New York Chinese Alliance church, 3 stone. We are a Christian and missionary Alliance church in the Lower East Side of Manhattan. And I've been serving there since 2013. So going on to my ninth year. In terms of how I got to New York, well, I was born in Venezuela, that's why my full name is Cristobal, people would just often call me, Chris. And I immigrated here when I was five, under a traveler's visa. But also, the primary reason was because my dad had decided to start a business in New York City. And so, we immigrated here, and shortly after, started going to school on really integrating into American society. Yeah, I think I covered your questions, right?

BY: Yeah. Yeah. So, tell me about your occupation, as a pastor like, what is the normal day as a pastor of the church? And what are some, like, difficulties in being in that kind of occupation?

CT: It's an interesting question, especially given the current climate, we are still very much in the middle of a pandemic, we are sort of seeing the end of the pandemic, hopefully, when vaccines roll out. But I would say prior to the pandemic, a typical day, would really be waking up in the morning, going to work like a regular nine to five job. But I would, I think, start the day with Scripture, meaning reading the Bible, and then depending on the agenda of the day, you know, I have a preaching schedule. So, most of the time, it will revolve around whether or not I need to prepare for the preaching schedule. For the sermon that week, or perhaps a program that I'm leading, whether it is fellowship, or a staff meeting. It is a very, very regular, in the sense that it is an everyday job. From nine to five, I think the difference is that there's a lot of freedom. Because we take care of the ministries ourselves. We plan and organize the ministries ourselves. And most of the people that we work with are members. So, they are volunteer workers. And they offer up their time to serve in these capacities. So, there is no, I guess, inclination or duty for them to do the task, or even help out, but rather out of their desire to serve or the desire to participate in ministries is really their primary motivator. I don't know how else to sort of explain my job, but it works. I would say, I would say my blessing. My

vocation is something that works with people all the time. And really, our primary task is to help them understand the Bible, and really understand God's presence in their lives. Now, if you want to, I guess, consider some of the harder things in my role in my vocation, it would probably be the fact that it is so hard to describe. Because I find myself wearing multiple hats. You know, even when I was in seminary, my professors told us that as a pastor, it is basically, we are a jack of all trades, right? We handle the finances of the church. We handle the recruiting of the church, we handle the counseling of the church, we handle the planning of the church, we end up being the custodians of the church. We end up being the teachers of the church. So literally every role that you can think have, you know we have stepped into in one way or another, or another? So, there is no clear playbook in terms of what a pastors supposed to be.

BY: And do you feel proud of you work as a pastor at the church that you are in?

CT: I'm sorry, can you repeat that question?

BY: Do you feel proud of your work as a pastor at the church that you are in?

CT: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

BY: Sure. Right. So yeah, the next questions are about the topics that we're going to discuss and the topics that are happening right now. So yeah, let's begin with the topic of pandemic. COVID-19. Whatever you call it, it does begin with how did you cope with COVID-19 as a pastor? And, do you have like a self-care routine to, you know, follow the sanitary rules?

CT: I got the first part of the question, but can you repeat the second part of the question? Oh, something routine? Do I have what routine?

BY: Like a self-care? What do you do to avoid, you know, suffer the virus? And those sort of, like, for example, in an hour, I have to wash my hands and to avoid the virus.

CT: I see, you know, yes. Um, so I think at least when I think back to the pandemic, it came really quickly. I think we were keeping our eyes out for potentially having to close. When ordinances or the rules actually were issued by the governor, for us to shut down and really for most of New York City to shut down. I think we didn't expect that to happen so quickly. And so, we, I would say, not only our church, but majority of churches were in a mad rush for the first couple of weeks to figure out what church services, what our regular meetings and our regular activities would look like. And so, there was a season of having to adjust and figure out how to do things online. I think we've come a long way since then, at this point. My fellow pastors like to say that even our elderly are experts on technology now. And so it is definitely been a

season of growing, necessary growing in terms of having to switch everything online, having to do everything online, even the giving has been switched online, our fellowships our regular weekly meetings, our staff meetings, everything is online, our services are online. But we, thankfully we did reopen last September. So, we have had a steady stream of people returning to the church for in person service, but obviously following the guidelines of the CDC, in New York State in ensuring that our spaces are only 33% occupied with six feet apart and we have ushers, mask mandates, to ensure that surfaces are wiped clean. And folks are following protocols in terms of in and out single stream, directional movement. And spaces are limited in the sense that we really opened up our sanctuary and the basement. So, church wise, operationally, it has been a trying season. I think it has also been a trying season in terms of the people that we work with. Our churches definitely had a fair share of deaths due to the COVID virus. I think at this point, everybody in our congregation at least knows one person or two who have passed away from the virus. So, it has been a rough season of mourning, a season of counseling, a season of grief. No, but at the same time, I think we, you know, serve a higher power, we recognize that God is in control. And so, while we are grieving, while we are sad, we also recognize that these brothers and sisters are in God's embrace. And so there is a greater hope there's a celebration of their life, and really the time that we've had with them. I think when it comes to a lot of the peripheral stuff, it definitely has gotten harder to minister in this season, in part because sometimes I like to say that ministry is really an active presence, right? You know, for us to minister being present is one of the most important things. And so not being able to physically be president has definitely been a little bit more challenging in this season, for the church, and I guess for my job as a vocation and calling as a pastor. So that's, that's one thing, in terms of, I guess, safety protocols. I typically just follow what the CDC in New York City has recommended, or New York state. Just to when I'm outside have a mask on, that I am socially distance, that I wash my hands accordingly. Use soap hand sanitizer, we installed automatically automatic hand sanitizers in the church.

CT: Anytime someone enters the building, we offer hand sanitizer. So, all of the protocols that CDC and the city and state have invited us to follow we have followed because they think this pandemic is something that we definitely take very seriously. Even more so for myself. We live three blocks from Elmhurst hospital, which in the beginning of the pandemic was the hotspot for Coronavirus deaths. In fact, I did see the refrigeration trucks that were parked outside of the hospital because they ran out of morgue space. So, it was a very real reality not only for myself, but also for the community that I live in.

BY: Yeah, and you say that from your social circle you lose some people, right?

CT: Yes, definitely within the church.

BY: Okay, would you like to explain more about it?

CT: I don't know what you mean by explain, but we...

BY: Like how did you cope with the loss of someone who passed away of COVID-19?

CT: I think as a pastor, we care more for the family. Obviously, if they pass away from COVID, it's not much different than you know, any other death, right? Besides the fact that this is a pandemic and it's widespread, but in terms of how we view death, and how we view a passing of a brother or sister. They are of the faith, then it is really a time for celebration, celebration of their life. Because the suffering, the pain that our physical bodies our human bodies have on Earth has come to an end and they are in God's embrace. So for the deceased, it is a celebration and the family, remaining family members also view it that way. But the grief, the sadness, that is something that we as a church continue to walk with the brothers and sisters in the family who are you know, still mourning to oftentimes, as a church, we have done meal trains for those who have lost members. And we have done check-ins, regular check ins where people sign up and we make sure that the brother or sister or family are checked in and their needs are taken care of so they have adequate time to rest. There is a financial need. We have stepped up and we have offered through our mercy fund, you know opportunities for them to have some of the financial burdens lifted from the church. So, really, I think we've been more of a practical presence. But for, I guess, the emotional needs, it's really through one-on-one conversations in checking in with these family members.

BY: And, besides of emotional situations, did you suffer like financial situations because of COVID?

CT: Personally, or for the church?

BY: If you want, you could talk personally, or the church, both are fine.

CT: Okay. Personally, not as much, we're very blessed and thankful that the church has been good to us in ensuring that even though we are in a deficit due to the pandemic, that the pastor still get their paycheck. And so they believe in the sense that for pastors, that they should be taken care of with double honor. And I'm very thankful for them in this. But at the same time, we're also very blessed in that through the pandemic, the giving, while at first it was, it took a dip, and we were very much concerned about it. But over the summer, it really picked up again. So, I'm very thankful for the brothers and sisters who are mindful and really willing to sacrifice so that the pastors are taken care of. But on the other side, we're also blessed that our church was able and qualified for the PPP loan, which is the government financial assistance for small businesses and institutions in need. So as a church, we were most definitely hit. But under the guidelines, we qualified for both the first and second round. So that

is a blessing that we were able to receive a little bit to help us at least take care of the salary of the pastors.

BY: Nice. And yeah, so do you have family here in New York, right now?

CT: Yes, I live with my wife and my brother,

BY: Your brother? And your parents?

CT: My parents are deceased.

BY: Oh, deceased? Okay. In your family's circle. Are you coping with the COVID financially as well, right, like you're doing go through the bad?

CT: Can you repeat that question? I'm sorry.

BY: In your family, you have your brother and your wife, right? Did they suffer the impact of COVID financially?

CT: Okay, um, they did not actually. Thankfully, for both of them, they work in fields that were able to send them home to work. So, they've been working from home since the pandemic began. It really hasn't impacted them financially. So, we are very thankful for that.

BY: So, your family right now. Everything fine. It's working everything's good financially.

CT: That's correct.

BY: What have you learned in this pandemic? Specifically, in the beginning of the crisis?

CT: I think we've learned a lot of things. I mean, if you want to start with technology, we've definitely learned to use technology in ways that we haven't used before. But I think a couple of other things that I really have struck us is some of the things that we deem necessary and pass. Definitely, we have learned to do without. Whether that is like weekly meetings that we just needed to meet up and schedule and touch base with that, at this point, we can like just do through text messages.

CT: Or there were things in the past that I think we also took for granted, like eating out that we realize now how much of a privilege it is. So, I think those are like the smaller life lessons. But if I had to look back at the pandemic, I would probably say that I also realize just how important human interaction is. Because I think one of the things that really stood out through this

pandemic is the mental health crisis that has come up. As a result of the pandemic, we've been so isolated, we've stayed home, you know, to, to ensure that not only are we safe, but our family is safe. But that has kept us from human contact, that has kept us from being able to see each other. And, in so over an extended period of time lots of us have sort of much smaller circles in terms of people that we interact or talk with on a regular basis. And that has spurred on, I guess, a lot of mental health issues that I think people did not have in the past but have recognized that there that it exists now in their lives, and they're wrestling with it. So, you know, if there's one thing that I think really comes across is that, you know, that notion that we were not meant to be alone, like we were created to be in communities, to be in interactions, and relationships with people, and it's very clear through this pandemic.

BT: Yeah. Since I'm an introvert, I sometimes tend to, you know, get to talk to someone, like, for example, because of the pandemic, I had to talk with my neighbor, you know, with a sense of meaning. I'm kind of introverted but I also need some human communication.

CT: Yeah, yes. Yes. Very much so.

BT: Yes. And what do you think is the hardest part of the pandemic?

CT: I think the hardest part of the pandemic, if I had to gauge everything, looking at hindsight, and you know, it's been, it's been a little bit more than a year now, right?

BT: No, I mean, you could like, just like something that has happened to you and was tough. For example, the beginning, if you want, in the beginning of the pandemic, or in the middle of the pandemic?

CT: Hmm, okay. I think one of the hardest parts were or definitely was part of the beginning of the pandemic, in the mad rush to sort of stabilize what life online is going to look like. And I think, having the children, youth, particularly elementary, junior high, high school students, what school is going to look like, I think really threw them for a loop. And I think a lot of them really had a hard time adjusting. And for us, as leaders and more people working with students, it was really hard, because we found some of them literally falling through the holes, right, we couldn't reach them. They didn't have access to internet or phone. And so it was really hard to touch base with them. You know, and I feel like that those are people that we've lost, right? That we lost contact with, and we don't know how they're doing. And I think that took a sort of like an emotional hit. Yeah, it was definitely one of those times where I finally came to terms and I realized that there's only so much you can do. You know, and you got to care for the ones that you are able to reach, you are able to talk to and so on. Coming to terms with that was definitely hard.

BY: Were you able to contact them?

CT: Eventually we did. And we were able to contact them. And we realized that whether it's a decision of the parents to not continue to I guess contact us or have us connect with them, or that they've been going to more local communities, or participating in more local community events. There was some closure in recognizing that they're being taken care of. It doesn't have to be by me, but someone else.

BY: Okay. And, the next question is, what have been your favorite thing? What was, besides all of the negative things that is all about the pandemic? What was the most positive thing that happened to you in the pandemic?

CT: I would say it's being able to spend time with my family. I think, you know, it's one of those things where, prior to the pandemic, everyone in the house, meaning my wife, and my brother, we had a nine to five. And so, everyone left for work, and came back at night. And they were tired, exhausted, you know, and so there wasn't a lot of time to spend together. But the pandemic has definitely allowed us to do a lot more of that.

BY: And were there like, any activities that you did with your brother and your wife?

CT: Yeah, we started watching a lot of TV shows. It's interesting. We watch TV shows together. And I think one of the things that has been a blessing as we were, we've been able to have regular meals together, like lunch and dinner, and just being able to sit around a table and talk.

BY: That's awesome. That's sounds cool. About COVID-19. How has COVID-19 change how you think about the relationship with our health as individuals and our health as a society?

CT: That's a rough question. It's a good one, I definitely think that there's no longer the individual thing, when it comes to our health, knowing just how dangerous the spread of the disease was, and how infectious it was, that our very own decisions, whether to wear a mask or not wear a mask, whether to stay home if we're feeling sick or not, can potentially hurt. Even lead someone to die. So, it was definitely eye opening in terms of social responsibility in recognizing that our own decisions. While it's individual, and it pertains to ourselves, they can have vast effects on the communities around you. So, I think I've definitely had a new appreciation of when folks advise me to take like the flu shot annually. They're like, yeah, you may not get the flu, but what about those around you? You can still infect others. And that's really opened up my mind and understanding my own responsibility towards the health of others, that I have a role in that, and I have to be socially responsible.

BY: In a brief way, how do you think the government handled the COVID crisis?

CT: I think, for the local and state government, I think New York did a really good job. Overall, if I had to look across the board at the remaining 50 states. If I had to look at the federal response and other states responses, probably not so good, because I think you know, this is very complicated. Given the makeup of individual states and where they land on this issue. But I would say that New York definitely had one of the better responses. And our federal government probably did not. So that's where I would stand on that.

BY: And how would you rate the government did in rolling out the vaccine?

CT: LI think like on a scale of one to 10, maybe like a seven, right? The fact that we have the vaccine, and it's publicly available. Again, we're a unique government, and that every state has their own way of distributing vaccines. But for New York, the fact that we're at a place where anyone starting next week, anyone who is 16 and older, can sign up for it is a tremendous blessing. So I would say that while it took a little bit, it's definitely getting there.

BY: And would you get the vaccine as well?

CT: Yeah, I actually already got my first shot. I'm waiting for my second.

BY: And how do you feel about the world reopening?

CT: I'm optimistic, obviously. You know, given that we are a community, my occupation deals with the community. And we are more or less a community institution. So very optimistic, looking forward to it. But, there's lots of challenges, ensuring that people continue to follow the protocols, but also just changing people's attitudes, because a whole year of sustaining inside and being able to do everything online as a sort of giving them a new way of thinking that, “hey, I can just continue to stay home and still be able to do these things.” But forgetting that the notion of interaction human interaction and relationships is enhanced by meeting in person.

BY: Yeah, once the world re-opens everything will be like some kind of party.

CT: Well, we'll see. We'll see.

BY: We'll see. And speaking about freedom, what would be the first thing would you do once the world re-opens?

CT: What would be the first thing I do when we reopen?

BY: Yes.

CT: When we fully reopen, probably. I don't know if there was a first thing was sort of fully reopen at church already. I would say like, I probably want to have like a big dinner with a bunch of people at a restaurant. I missed those fellowship dinners. That's something we haven't been able to do. We've been able to go to restaurants. But it was like, literally like three of us, right? But we used to go to restaurants were like 20 or 30 of us, right? So, I definitely would like to be able to do that.

BY: Yes. And how do you think the world will change after the pandemic?

CT: Well, I think one thing, technology is probably taking a big step forward in terms of the innovation that was necessary in order to keep up with the working world. So, that's one thing that I would definitely change is that technology will really take a step forward. Second thing, I think the world will take a change in is, probably, the way that we work in a way that we go to school. I do think that being forced into the pandemic, lots of opportunities to do things that we were never really able to do and to in the past or never really able to make mainstream has been given an opportunity to be mainstream like for, you know, even like this like being able to talk over video chat and record. You know, that's definitely something that prior to this we didn't use very often or didn't do very often, right? So yeah, I would say like different parts of life, I think things will, things will make a huge difference. I also think that this pandemic has brought a lot of conditions to the surface that I think in the past has not been exposed. I mean, we had some historical stuff happened through the pandemic, with regards to Black Lives Matter, and now the anti-Asian hate racism, both have sort of reach a boiling point, if you would, and that will definitely stick around after the pandemic.

BY: Yes. Since you mention about the topic of Black Lives Matter, do you remember where you where and what you saw when you heard about George Floyd's murder for the first time?

CT: Where was I? I think... I definitely read it on the phone. I don't remember what I was doing. But I remember reading on the phone. And I remember watching the video. I remember the outrage I saw on social media. So I wanted to find out what it was about before I said anything. So that that was my, I think my first impression of it. And then when I did watch the video, I'll be honest, there was a sense of like, it's happened again. But I didn't think anything big was going to come from it. Because we've had a couple of these I think, most famously in the city. In New York City, it was Eric Garner, right, literally almost exactly the same scenario where he couldn't breathe. And it was with a police officer. And so we had some protests, but really not much came from that. So, when George Floyd happened, I had similar reactions. “Okay, it's happening again.” But what's going to change this time around, so I did not expect the Black Lives Matter movement to blow up the way it did. To really pick up the momentum that it had,

and to be able to enact some of the conversations and changes that really swept across the nation that I think no other time we've seen since, perhaps, the civil rights movement.

BY: Yeah. And explain to me, why do you think this anti-racist protest erupted?

CT: Well, I think it was a combination. Because what George Floyd did was really open up the avenues for some of the other things that were happening across the United States to come to light. So, we got to know Brianna Taylor more, because of what happened with George Floyd. We got to know what happened with Ahmaud Aubrey, because of what happened from George Floyd. So, I really do think that it was a conduit because of the outrage because of what the media and really social media was doing. With regards to making it known what happened to George Floyd that some of these other names really picked up, in terms of their story in terms of their investigation, in terms of really the racists, the profiling, and then all of the injustice that was present in these cases. And so, it really led to a boiling point, like I said, where when you have so many stories happening is such more time than you realize. There's something very real, that is happening. And we can no longer turn a blind eye to it. Or at least like, there's no longer a way to suppress it in a way that people can't connect the dots.

BY: And what are some of the reasons that you think protesting Black Americans and the non-Black Americans are angry about conditions in the United States?

CT: I think it's fair, I mean, statistics. If you look at prison ratios, if you look at laws enacted, if you look at the inequity, between those of, I guess, Black descent, who identify as black, whether it is financially or socially, there is a disparity. That's very clear. And I think, on top of that, there is this notion, or at least this common understanding that, you know, they I'm not going to speak for the police officers, but there are statistics, and there are more, I guess, visible evidence that they are treated more violently, and perhaps almost unjustly bias and discriminated against when it comes to the way that law enforcement views them. So, I do think that there is something there that whether statistically, or whether visibly through media and social media, it's pretty evident.

BY: Do you believe there are issues with the criminal justice system in the United States that have helped flame these protests?

CT: I want to say yes, but I don't have the institutional knowledge or the topical knowledge to really back it up. But I do believe that there is systemic racism that is present in our institutions. And that can come in many forms. And sometimes they are embedded, unfortunately, in it, too, but off the top of my mind right now, I don't have anything that I can back that up with, but I do lean towards that opinion. Yes.

BY: When did you become aware of those issues?

CT: Um, I think honestly, I've always had some sense of them. In part, because growing up in New York City, and then growing up in one, I guess, one of the worst schools, my high school isn't even in existence anymore. But I hung out, then I spent time with black teenagers and Hispanic teenagers. But I've also had experiences, personal experiences, where we would be in a group, we get pulled over by truancy and police officers and treatment wise, questioning wise, attitude wise, I would be treated much better than those that I was with, which were Black and skin color or Hispanic. You know, so there, there was a very clear disparity, though we were in the same group. My treatment was definitely a lot better. So, yes, some personal experience tells me that. I also studied a little bit about it in John Jay when I went there for my undergrad.

BY: Do you think the story of race and racism in the United States impact the BLM movement?

CT: Oh, absolutely. There's almost no question about that.

BY: In what ways?

CT: I think that this was really, if anything, it was an explosion of the pent-up frustration, anger over what they saw as unfair treatment on bias treatment. While at the same time recognizing that the police officers were doing their job. Unfortunately, the way that it played out was that these officers, maybe I shouldn't be the one speaking to it. But there's a lot of factors that sort of lead to the thinking and believing that it had a role in the murder of Brianna Taylor, Ahmaud Aubrey and then George Floyd, which led to the widespread outrage, and really the movement to speak up against the systematic injustice that's present and the prejudice that is present in our institutions.

BY: The next question is, how do you explain the persistence of racism in the United States, generally, and New York City specifically?

CT: Why explain? Can you repeat the question? I'm sorry?

BY: How do you explain the persistence of racism in the United States generally, and New York City specifically?

CT: How to explain it? I think unfortunately it is really a product of our culture. You know, there is always this ongoing debate of who's better, or what's considered better. And really, what media tells us or shows us is better. And so, there's always this cultural clash, identity clash of who's better and what's better, right? And, when that thought, or when the attitude of certain

people, groups, certain colors, skin colors, certain social classes, being better, and gets acted upon them, really, that's when we really see racism play out. Very, for one person to say that they're better than the other person, there needs to be some sort of justification, whether that is by skin color, whether that is by wealth, whether that is by social status, you know, whatever it is. And being that America is a land of immigrants. You know, and depending on which state you come from, you're either majority or minority, in your neighborhood, in your school district, whatever it is, like, there's always going to be a clash of differences. When it comes to the way that we're created, the opportunities that we have, you know, the, the blessings that we've been blessed with. And when we start using those as means to put ourselves on top of others put ourselves in better places than others, and justify our actions towards them. That's racism. But unfortunately, that's also a kind of society that we live in. Right, who are always comparing. And we're always generalizing. And I would say that that applies to New York City too, as the melting pot, right? We still call ourselves the melting pot.

CT: And just hearing some of the vernacular, some of the ways that we talk about our neighborhood to be talking about culture. It really already brings out this notion that something is better, or one group is better than another. You know, and having been on the receiving end of some of these, I guess, comments. You know, you're gonna start feeling defensive, right? You're gonna start feeling certain way when you hear them about yourself, and so you either try to assimilate and change yourself and conform, or you start fighting back, and you start demonizing the other groups, you start talking down to other groups, you find a common trait and you start nailing it. So the spiral of racism continues. So, I, at the end of the day, and think if, given my position, and what I believe in, it's a product of sin. Like we don't see each other as God's creatures. We see each other on face value, our skin color, our background, our education levels, our wealth, right? But we're all created in God's image. When we lose that, that's when all the other things come in: biases, racism, you know, stereotypes, everything.

BY: And what will be the best way to, since we are like, as you said, God's image? What would be the response to someone who feels insecure of their race? Whether Hispanic, Black, Asian.

CT: What would I say to them? Hmm. I would say that what's important is what's inside. I think we can't categorize ourselves based off what we look. I think everyone has a, everyone is unique, and God created us that way. And we have to be able to appreciate that uniqueness. Because God blesses us each individually with experiences. And all these experiences are unique, like our parents are different, our temperaments are different. And there's a reason for that, right? And we have to be able to appreciate that in each person. Because in that, we see God's power, and we see how God meant for us to support one another. Because in your uniqueness, you will have strengths, but you will have weaknesses. And what do you do with those weaknesses? You have brothers and sisters to come along and help you cover those weaknesses, right, in the same way that your strengths might be someone else's weaknesses.

So again, this notion of community and relationship, this is why we work together. And we have to see beyond our skin color, we have to see beyond social class, we have to see beyond the stereotypes and see each other as one big God, family.

BY: Do you think the New York city became an epicenter of the protests?

CT: I don't think we're the epicenter protests. I think I'm in Minneapolis. Definitely. I mean, that's, that's where it happened, right? But we definitely because we are so dense as a city, we probably were one of the more representative cities, in allowing the protests to happen.

BY: And how have the uprisings across the country shifted how you think about your ethnic identity and your place in US society?

CT: Ah, I don't know if it's shifted, I think if anything it reminded me and really encouraged me to look into it more. I think I've always known that I was a minority. I've always felt I was a minority. And, you know, depending on the season in my life, there were seasons where I didn't want to recognize that. And there were other seasons where I took pride in it, and I, you know, really, really acknowledged and embodied it. But often, oftentimes, like with life, life just gets busy. And you're not thinking about that until you're targeted for it. And so, really thinking about the fact that we have brothers and sisters, friends, colleagues, who are targeted because of it, we can't help but to start examining, and really looking at ourselves about how perhaps our identity also is a means for this to happen to us, which, unfortunately, in the time that we live in, is for the Asian American Chinese community. You know, the anti-Asian racism thing is very much on surface now. So, I think is really allowed me to appreciate and really embolden my thinking and my representation of it.

BY: Do you have any stories that you're willing to share about encounters you have had with racism or the people?

CT: You mean, towards Asians, towards myself? Because I'm Asian?

BY: Yeah, like, those kinds of encounters.

CT: Only? I mean, I shared them with you earlier, the profiling when I was in high school. I think throughout the years, just being every so often hearing a comment, where people are making sounds that are disrespectful, whether it is being called a chink or gook. Like those happen, I would say a couple of times a year at least in passing. Question is to escalate those or do you let a slide and I think for the longest time, we've sort of just let it slide. And the moments where it was confrontational, it always sort of ended when you do confront them. Because then they start backing down. But I think specifically, I don't think I have any off the

top of my head. But I think my brothers and sisters, I've heard so many. Whether it is you know, recently hearing about going into a restaurant and then being called out by guests there. I wouldn't say neighbors, but people sitting around a table, you know, a socially distanced table away from them, and a hearing very loud comments that they no longer wanted to eat in the same restaurant, because, you know, they were afraid of the Coronavirus because an Asian couple is sitting in the same restaurant as though. So things like that are not overly confrontational, but still very indicative of the racism that is present in our communities in in New York City.

CT: Okay, so well, that's the lesson that you learned because of what happened with you. (inaudible) There's still racism in, not only New York City, but everywhere in the United States.

CT: Can you repeat that question? I'm sorry, I didn't catch the question.

BY: Because that, you know, and because of that situation, and because you have suffered, like you say, when you were in high school with your close ones. And the story you mentioned, there was a couple who did not want to enter a restaurant because there was an Asian couple who were in the restaurant. And what you learned is that there will be always racism, even though we are a community in the we are like, even though, those, like 20-30 years of being together, like a community that will be like that little portion of hate in the community.

CT: Yeah. Yeah. I would agree with this statement. I don't think it's going to go away. I think, if anything, it's, we have to learn how to process it, and how to respect really, the uniqueness that each one of us was born and been blessed with and being able to accept it, you know, but unfortunately, humanity and sin will always sort of bringing us to a place where we want to be better. And we want to be better than anyone else. And sometimes that takes root in racism and being in acting out and speaking. So, yeah, I don't think it's going away. I think if anything, we learn, we learn to understand each other and we learn to respect each other.

BY: And were you active in the protest at all in a digital or in person way over the next six months?

CT: Not the last six months, but I definitely attended one in June of last year.

BY: Can you tell us about that experience?

CT: Yeah, so I attended what was called the Pray Mark Act protests. It was led by over 100 pastors from New York City. And we moved from Carroll Gardens all the way to the Barclays Center in Brooklyn. That was our route. And the purpose of that protest was for pastors to stand together with those of black skin color, recognizing that this cannot continue. And what

was happening in the media and across America was we are we're clear that our black brothers and sisters were being discriminated against. And there are systematic justices that I guess kept them at bay and discriminated against them. So, that protest was sustained in solidarity. But at the same time, we were aiming to do it in a way that was not destructive. And to show New Yorkers, our congregants that there was a way to protest that did not destroy property that did not really, I guess, this dishonor the fact that we're Christians. And so I went to a protest, there were, well over a couple of 1000 people. And the reason was, I think, initially, we had folks come that were mostly church and pastors, but along the route, we had other protesters join the protests, and try to transform into something else, unfortunately. So, towards the end of the protests, all those died here to the original expectations. And the original intent of the protests, we left once we arrived at a Barclay center, and we did a prayer. Whereas I know for sure, another group of protesters continued in the lead a group onto the Manhattan Bridge, causing traffic to stop. And eventually police had to arrest them from both sides of the bridge. So, it was unfortunate that, I guess, in a sense, the protest got hijacked towards the end.

BY: And why did you decide to attend that kind of rallied protest?

CT: Um, I think I wanted to be a part of a movement that definitely was different than what the protest people were seeing with the, unfortunately, the looting and the destruction of property. So, knowing that this was organized by pastors across the city, I wanted to be a part of that. Yeah, that's that was really my intent. But at the same time, I think it was also my first time going. So, I wanted to observe and learn. And that was the attitude I approached it with.

BY: Do you think Black Lives Matter shifted the culture? If so, why or why not?

CT: I definitely think so. I think it's moved us into a place where there are a lot more grassroots decentralized movements across the United States now. That literally anybody can start organizing and really go and protest. Whereas in the past, it was very localized. And there was there were very clear leaderships. Meaning you knew who was organizing and, you know, if you targeted these people that are very likely to move in my end. But think about Black Lives Matter have moved us into a place where there is decentralized leadership. And literally anybody can take up a banner and go out and really start leading a protests or movement in their own city in their own neighborhood. So, it has definitely shifted us into a different way of protesting in a different way of communicating to our leaders or our cities, our discontent or our demands, if you would.

BY: And how have the past few months change how you think about police and racism in the US?

CT: Ah, well, I, like I said, if it weren't for racism, it just really brought it back to the forefront, like, always sort of knew was there and now it's very much in front of me. In terms of police. You know, having a couple of police officer friends myself, I do think that, unfortunately, it really is a wide range. And at the end of the day, it really comes down to people and people, people's decisions. And so, I don't think the police overall are to blame, but perhaps individuals within the police force are to blame, or should take responsibility.

BY: And did you learn about the history of racism in the in this country since the protest is started?

CT: Okay, you're going to have to repeat that question.

BY: Did you learn about the history of racism in this country since the protest is started?

CT: Have I read?

BY: Learn more about the history of racism.

CT: Oh, yes, yes, I have learned more.

BY: What are the some of the most important things of what you learned?

CT: I think some of these are really recent, really understanding of the long-term effects of racialization in our country. As a product and really, as sort of a, I would say, not only a product, but really the means to continue to suppress and to keep certain groups or ethnicities down. So, really understanding real racialization was one of those things that I've definitely picked up recently.

BY: Why do you think there is so much backlash to BLM?

CT: I think there's as much backlash to it as there are differences in ideology across the US. So yes, I think there's a lot of people who disagree with it, because they don't think there's an issue of systemic racism or injustice.

BY: The net question is how do you explain the looting and destruction of property that took place during the protest?

CT: Um, personally, I believe that it is a product of… Okay, well, honestly, I think it's just a really a product of the situation that allowed it to get to where was that there are people who are taking advantage of the situation, whether that is the mass protests or not? To take

advantage you know, I think there is, there was a lot of discontent. And it was a way for them to voice it. But also, to get something for themselves.

BY: Yeah. In spite of that, there has been a situation of, besides of Black Lives Matter, there are those who do not agree to Black Lives Matter, there are more there are people that say that All Lives Matter. Not only the lives of Black people matters, but the life of Asians, white people, Hispanic, many others. So, the question is that, how do you explain to the people who respond to Black Lives Matter with All Lives matter or ALM?

CT: Sorry, I didn't think about this question, but I definitely have a stance on it. So, I think for the folks who believe and say that All Lives Matter. They say so in response directly to the slogan or to saying that Black Lives Matter. In fact, there was a season where the slogan was Blue Lives Matter, right? for police officers.

CT: And, unfortunately, I think that slogan, All lives matter was done in direct response to Black Lives Matter. And in doing so, I think what it's doing is that it's taking away the validity, and really the cause, the call behind Black Lives Matter, which is to bring attention to the injustice, the systemic racism, that Blacks have experience throughout the history of the United States, particularly starting with slavery. So what I would say to these people is, I think, by seeing that you don't realize what exactly you're saying, and you don't realize what Black Lives Matter actually stands for, or at least what it represents. Because if you did, I don't think you would say that at all.

BY: For some people there will be no end in this kind of chaos that there will be like some kind of civil war like theories in social media, like Twitter or Facebook, the China virus, conspiracy theories. Some people think that the chaos won't end. But do you think that there will be like some kind of resolve after all the situation?

CT: I don't know we’re ever going to get into that place in our lifetime, right? When you think about all the disagreements, when you think about all the different points and sort of how our government is run. You know, I think there can be understanding. But then there are always going to be people who refuse to and want to act out, right? This goes back to that notion of sin, that notion of wanting to be better, and deciding that you are better. So, unfortunately, I don't think I don't see an end. I don't think it will end. But I do think that there can be equilibrium in the sense that there's enough being done that will sort of keep those voices and those thoughts at bay.

BY: And if there was some kind of end, how would you like to see this movement resolved?

CT: I think for one for the individual cases that really sparked this movement. We love to see justice being served in those involved would really get their do in terms of their actions towards these victims. Probably to also have some sort of systemic change that will prevent this from happening again. Or at least to stem it to some extent. I think that would be a start.

BY: And going forward to the recent times, to 2021. Let's talk about the topic of this year, which is the US Capitol invasion. And what was going through your mind when you first heard the US Capitol was invaded?

CT: I guess, first it was like, “Oh, this is interesting.” I didn't expect this to happen in our country.

BY: What do you think led these people to attempt to violently overthrow the government?

CT: I think for the most part, a lot of these people felt like their rights were trampled upon. They believed in the words of our former president, that they should go to the Capitol and disrupt the process of validating the election. And so, you know, a combination of their own discontent with the results of the election, along with what they believe what's happening, and the words of the president spurring them on, a former president spurring them on. They decided that this was the best course of action.

BY: Okay, and were you surprise how they were treated by the police?

CT: Ah, I wasn't surprised. What I was surprised with was how under prepared, the police were.

BY: How unprepared were they?

CT: It didn't seem like they were ready to deal with these large aggressive crowds at all. And nor were they armed with a riot gear the way that we've seen the Capitol Police be armed in the past, when I think other protests took place in front of the Capitol, or nearby the Capitol by the White House. So, it definitely did not seem like they were ready to handle the large crowds that that showed up.

BY: There have been reports that members of the groups that stormed the U.S. Capitol included police officers, elected officials, and members of the U.S. military. What, if anything, should we as a society do with the information that segments of U.S. law enforcement, elected officials and the armed forces tried to overthrow U.S. Democracy?

CT: I think unfortunately, because we are a country that allows free speech that protects our individual rights so much, that it's really hard to nail the issue on any one of these agencies, or government organizations, because, you know, unfortunately, these individuals were acting out of their own volition in their own right, despite knowing the offices and positions that they serve it. And so, you know, if anything, I think, perhaps we should take steps towards. You know, I don't want to say like fixing people's ideologies, but at least being able to address and have protocols in place that would allow people to express their discontent but not participate in breaking the law in such a way, especially when they're supposed to be protecting and enforcing the law.

BY: What do you think about President Trump's reaction to invasion?

CT: I don't think it's a secret that I don't think that he was a good president to begin with. And I think a lot of his comments and remarks is sort of where not where, but what insight it a lot of what we have today, which is a very open expression of racism, very open expressions of bias and discrimination.

BY: And how did you explain the lack of hostility between the two public political parties?

CT: Lack of hostility?

BY: Yes.

CT: During the capital riots?

BY: Yeah, I would say that,

CT: I think it was due to the fact that they were all fearing for their lives. I think some of the testimonies that you hear from the Congress, people, and the senators who were caught in the middle of that secret service was trying to escort them out into safety, that they basically put down their grievances, and conflicts, and were looking at each other like people who needed to be protected. You know, so I think in that moment, they weren’t looking at each other's political parties, but they were looking at each other as human beings who are on the same potentially sinking boat if these rioters were to get into the Capitol Building.

BY: So, do you think that in that, in that time, in that specific moment, was the only moment when the two political parties were truly united?

CT: It's interesting, I would say the majority of the parties were united, because we can clearly see that there were some people in the hiding when they were being kept safe before the

capital was secure, that were still very much rooting the rioters on. I'm not going to name names, but you doing do a quick Google search. And you'll know there's a couple of senators and congresspeople that were actually hoping that the rioters got through.

BY: If Trump was a woman or non-white, how would the impeachment trial have been the same or different?

CT: I wouldn't even know how to begin to answer that question, sir. I don't think I can answer that one. I don't know. I think if his attitude was the same. I think it would have ended the same way.

BY: So, I have another question. What do you think of people who don't want to take the vaccine because of theories that are lurking around? Specifically, there's a theory that the Johnson and Johnson uses fetal- I don't know how to say like, pieces or fragments of abortions to treat the virus.

CT: Stem cells? Um, I don't really have a position on that. I think if they're that their beliefs are so strong that then don't take it. You know, there are other vaccines out there that they can take.

BY: What do you think of people who don't want to take the vaccine because of fear of risking their lives?

CT: From the vaccine? I think in this season, it's probably valid, because it's, you know, vaccines still relatively new. So, I'm not gonna disparage them or look down on them because of what they think. But I would say like, you know? If like three or four years from now, they still feel the same way, then I think they need to take a hard look at science and what they believe and what they see. But in this season, because it's still relatively new, I understand the uncertainty.

BY: After the US Capitol invasion, what are your thoughts about America and its future?

CT: I don't know how much has changed. I'm just glad that we have a new president who doesn't subscribe the same ideologies as our previous president, and who seems to be working to bring this country back towards a place where, you know, where there's a clear stance that this racism is unacceptable. Bias is unacceptable, and being able to come to a place of at least mutual understanding that folks with these ideologies would not stand out, or these beliefs would not stand out, or at least have the courage to probably voice them the way that they have been under the Trump administration.

BY: Understood, yeah. To be honest, no one knows the future and it's uncertain of what will happen. So, what we only, like what we only know is that we have to focus on the present and focusing more on the future, you know? So yeah. And this concludes my interview with Pastor Cristobal Tong and thank you, Chris, for this insightful meeting. And I hope you have a great night.

CT: You too. Thank you for the privilege of doing this.