1st Place

Tina Shah
Columbia University Graduate
School of Journalism

2007 Finalist
Chandler Award

FOR DISPLAY ONLY
The RNA Chandler Contest

Celebrating Mass Without the Masses
Published on Nov. 12, 2006

It was 12:20 p.m. on a recent Monday, and the Rev. Norberto Cordovez, the assistant pastor at the Chapel of San Lorenzo Ruiz, was preparing to celebrate Mass. Wearing an emerald stole atop his white robe, he peered out at the 36 empty wooden pews. Then, almost as if he were speaking to himself, he began reading from the Bible.

Ten minutes later, a lone elderly woman walked in and took a seat. This time, at least, Father Cordovez would not have to finish Mass by himself.

"It's good if two come," he said after the service. "And we are lucky if five come."

This is not how the Rev. Erno Diaz, the pastor, envisioned the attendance level when the chapel opened last year. But the chapel has been a victim of the fact that almost no Filipinos live in its neighborhood.

Housed in a brown brick building on Broome Street near Mulberry Street, part of an expanding Chinatown, the chapel was intended as a gathering place for the city's growing Filipino population. According to the 2000 Census, New York is home to 50,000 Filipinos, most of them Roman Catholic.

If local Filipinos crave garlicky chicken adobo, they can stroll down Roosevelt Avenue near 69th Street in Woodside, Queens. If they want news from home, they can pick up a copy of The Filipino Reporter. But to worship in a setting where specific traditions of their culture are observed, like singing hymns in vernacular and attending 5 a.m. Masses for nine days before Christmas, Filipinos' option for years was a bare-bones room in a Midtown office building that the New York Archdiocese had made available.

After a decade of lobbying, Father Diaz persuaded the archdiocese to establish a chapel to serve this population. Named after the first Filipino saint, the chapel opened in September 2005, and while all worshipers are welcome, its services are designated especially for Filipinos.

To become a full-fledged church, a chapel must show that it is economically stable and has a regular congregation. San Lorenzo Ruiz is nowhere near meeting those criteria. That is because although Filipino communities can be found in Midtown, Woodside and especially Elmhurst, Queens, very few Filipinos live in Chinatown.

Father Diaz is struggling to pay the bills. And paradoxically, not only are worshipers sparse on weekdays -- on Sundays, Filipino families and organizations sponsor Masses and invite friends and relatives -- they are not even necessarily Filipino.
One regular at daily Mass is Gilda Cianci, 91. Every afternoon for the past 72 years, she has descended three flights of stairs from her apartment, and, now with the help of a cane, walked across the street to the chapel.

Ms. Cianci, who on this Monday afternoon was wearing a Blessed Mary pin on the collar of her navy coat, was a regular at the Catholic church that occupied the site on Broome Street, Most Holy Crucifix, which for decades served the neighborhood's Italian-Americans. But she is not dismayed by the fact that the chapel is for the Filipino community. "I come to church to praise God," she said.
The RNA Chandler Contest

Practicing Faith Without Hate
Ahmadis, a long way from Pakistan, savor religious freedom
Posted Tuesday, Feb. 27, 2007 12:00 AM

Rabbi Joseph Potasnik, with a skull cap firmly planted on his head, sits in between a turbaned man on the left and a man wearing a Jinnah hat on the right. Potasnik rises and takes the stand.

"There is a saying we have in Hebrew," he begins. "How important it is, how good it is when brothers also sit together."

This afternoon Potasnik is not in a synagogue. His audience is not Jewish. But he speaks with conviction at a recent interfaith service at Bait-ul Tahir, an Ahmadiyya mosque in Brooklyn.

"Someone asked the following question: why does it say also sit together?" Potasnik adds, explicating the saying, which is a verse from the Old Testament Book of Numbers.

"The answer is: we so often find in life that strangers can come together and talk to each other but for brothers, members of the same family, to talk to each other, that’s a great challenge," Potasnik explains.

"I don’t just come here as a stranger. I come here as a member of the family."

The word "family" resonates with the people who regularly attend this Ahmadiyya mosque at 1477 W. 8th St. in Bensonhurst. The building, once a synagogue, is now used for Friday prayers, Koran and Arabic classes for the youth and various events, like this interfaith symposium on a recent Sunday.

The event drew Catholics, Protestants, Sikhs and Jews. Such a service would never have happened in Pakistan, where most of the Ahmadis in the congregation come from, because Ahmadis there don’t enjoy the same religious freedom as they do in Brooklyn. The life stories of several who attended the symposium attest to this reality.

Fazal Mahmood, who was videotaping and later serving dinner at the event, had never heard a rabbi speak in Pakistan. Mahmood, 33, left Lahore, Pakistan because of the persecution he faced as an Ahmadi and entered the United States with an illegal passport - worth $20,000 - in November 2000. A year-and-a-half later he was granted asylum.

Ahmadis in Pakistan have to hide their identity, in fear of getting thrown in jail or even beaten to death for their beliefs. There are an estimated 286,000 Ahmadis who
live in Pakistan, according to the 1998 census released by the U.S. International Religious Freedom Report. It is difficult to collect exact figures on the number of Ahmadis in Pakistan, because many of them have boycotted completing census surveys since they have been persecuted, the report stated.

The Ahmadiyya sect, founded in 1889, aims to revive Islam through the teachings of Hadhrat Mirza Ghulam Ahmad of Qadian, Punjab. Ahmadis believe he is the promised Messiah after Prophet Muhammad and have adopted his message, “Love for all, hatred for none,” as their sacred motto. With the dominance of Muslim fundamentalist parties, like Jamaat e-Islam, in Pakistan in the 1970's, other Muslim sects began to coin Ahmadis as “kaufirs,” or non-believers.

“When religion and politics combine, it is very difficult,” Mahmood said.

In 1974, the Pakistani government declared all Ahmadis non-Muslims by amending the definition of a Muslim to someone who believes in Prophet Muhammad as the last prophet. After that, Mahmood said the “atmosphere changed.” Ahmadis could not even greet another Muslim with “salaam alaikum” or enter mosques.

Mahmood recalled marking the non-Muslim box on his college applications, because colleges in Pakistan have quotas for minorities. At University of Engineering & Technology Lahore, Mahmood knew he would not reveal that he is an Ahmadi.

“I was confident that I will try to hide myself. Most of students (Ahmadis) are trained to hide themselves,” said Mahmood, who would go into mosques with his Muslim friends and leave immediately from another door, scared of being caught.

When students from the Jamaat e-Islam party discovered Mahmood is an Ahmadi, he had to move off campus to finish his degree in civil engineering.

In March 2000, Mahmood began a daytime job as a civil engineer in central Lahore and bought property adjacent to his wife’s school to build an Internet café. Discussions began spurring among the teenagers who came to the café that Mahmood was Ahmadi and he was forced to leave the area. But that was not the end.

Someone in the community filed a police report against Mahmood. Without any explanations, Mahmood said he was arrested, thrown into jail and beaten excessively for a week. After that, Mahmood made up his mind to leave his parents, seven siblings and Pakistan.

Now Mahmood owns his own construction company and lives in a Brooklyn apartment with his wife and two kids. The members of Bait-ul Tahir are the only family members he has in America, many of whom helped him get his first home and job.
"Over here I am more religious and more attached to my community," Mahmood said.

He attributes much of this appreciation to the horrors in Pakistan.

Two months ago, Mahmood said he heard of an anti-Ahmadi event in Brooklyn, so he snuck in. He heard the same harsh tone and language that he had heard back in Pakistan, but this time he felt confident.

While the guarantee of religious freedom in America permits such anti-Ahmadi events, it also allows for interfaith services, such as the one held at his mosque.

"Over here, I am not afraid. They cannot harm me," Mahmood said.

The interfaith service also drew Matibur Zamadar, who oversaw the table of Ahmadiyya publications and served food with Mahmood that night. Unlike Mahmood, Zamadar is from India. He did not face the same persecution as Pakistani Ahmadis.

When Zamadar informed the Ahmadi leaders in Qadian, Punjab that he was moving to New York City, they sent a fax to Imam Inamul Haq Kauser of the Brooklyn mosque informing him. When Zamadar arrived, the imam called him and invited him to meet other leaders and Ahmadis in the mosque. Now he is one of them.

"I am feeling very good," Zamadar said at the symposium. "Some Sunni people are not so helpful, not so cooperative, but they (Ahmadis) behave as a friend and give guidance."

Zamadar, a professor of organic chemistry at Brooklyn College and a Ph.D. candidate, was born as a Sunni Muslim in Calcutta, but accepted the Ahmadiyya faith's ten oaths in 2002. Ahmadis gave him explanations and reasons he had been longing for and questioning Sunni imams for years, Zamadar said.

Unlike Pakistan, India has no law declaring Ahmadis as non-Muslims. But because of the proximity of the two countries and the migration of religiously-rooted political parties, some Ahmadis in India face persecution of a different nature.

Dr. Asghar Ali Engineer from the Centre for Study of Society and Secularism in Mumbai said that Ahmadis are not persecuted in India.

"They have full freedom like other Muslims to practice their faith," he wrote in an e-mail. But some Sunnis boycott Ahmadis and do not allow them to enter their mosques or cemeteries, he added. Zamadar knows this.

"From childhood, I heard that Ahmadis are not Muslims," Zamadar said.
After converting, Zamadar did not tell his parents until he came to Brooklyn in September 2005. He was afraid his parents would cut off their financial support because of his beliefs. Zamadar said he is convinced that his friends and family did not oppose his conversion because he is “well educated” and they believe he has reasonably thought it through. But he thinks that if he had stayed in India among his Sunni community, his Ahmadi beliefs could have been a greater challenge.

On this Sunday, both Mahmood and Zamadar have put on their plastic aprons and are serving vegetable rice, salad and a meat curry to their fellow Ahmadis as well as to their Christian and Jewish guests. It is a scene they never could have imagined unfolding in the countries of their birth.
The RNA Chandler Contest

Non-traditional Methods of Cremation
Few Hindus use the electric crematorium on Harishchandra Ghat
Posted Thursday, April 26, 2007 10:08 PM

No other city on earth is as famous for death as is Banaras (Varanasi). More than for her temples and magnificent ghats, more than for her silks and brocades, Banaras, the Great Cremation Ground, is known for death. --Author Diana L. Eck

VARANASI—It has been a few days since Sankhata Prasad’s mother died. She was 100 years old and stood less than five feet tall. Today Prasad has traveled nearly 50 miles in a jeep with 12 family members to cremate his mother’s body in Varanasi, one of the holiest cities for Hindus.

First Prasad visits the nearby street barber and gets his beard and head shaved; leaving a few strands of hair in the middle of his head to distinguish him as a Hindu. Then he walks down the “ghat,” or a stairway leading to the riverbank, and takes a dip in the holy waters of the Ganga River to purify his body before the traditions commence. He wraps a white piece of cotton cloth around his body. His eyes express tranquility. As the eldest son, Prasad is now ready to perform the funeral rites for his mother. But he doesn’t have much time.

Instead of taking his mother’s body to the banks of Harishchandra Ghat to be burned on a bed of wood near the Ganga River, Prasad ascends a hill and makes his way to the doors of a brick building with two chimneys atop. The red sign on the side of the building reads, “Electric crematorium.” Prasad along with three other men carry his mother’s body, laid on a bier and adorned in shimmering golden cloth, on his shoulders and through the doors. In this building, he only has to spend 500 rupees to cremate his mother, not the 5,000 it would cost for a wood pyre cremation, half the yearly salary for many locals. Moreover, here he can disperse his mother’s ashes into the Ganga 20 minutes after the ceremony and not have to wait close to three hours. This cremation method is affordable and efficient, but not considered traditional by most Hindus. Hindus deem that not following funeral rites outlined in the Hindu scriptures called the “Vedas” could keep people’s souls wandering for years before attaining “moksha,” or enlightenment. To prevent this, loved ones usually gather the necessary money for a wood pyre cremation.

But not everyone can afford the Vedic wood pyre funeral. Everything at the funeral costs money: the firewood, the ingredients for the funeral rites, the Brahmin priest who blesses the body and even the fire. People who cannot afford the money or time, like Prasad, can still cremate their loved ones in Varanasi’s electric crematorium. The funeral rites are done similarly, except the physical burning. But few use this modern cremation method. Most Hindus would rather cut costs by using less funeral ingredients and wood, but still have their family members burn on wooden pyres near the Ganga.
According to Hindu belief, Shiva, the Hindu deity of destruction, discovered Varanasi more than 2,500 years ago. Even today, pilgrims navigate through the narrow, unpaved streets of the city to visit and ask for blessings at Kashi Vishwanath Temple that is dedicated to Shiva. Hindus from around the world desire to be cremated in Varanasi because they believe their soul will be released from the cycle of rebirth and gain moksha. Hindus view death as a natural part of life and welcome it as “a long awaited guest,” writes Diana L. Eck in her book Banaras: The City of Light. As the Sanskrit saying goes, she adds, “Kashyam marnam muktih.” Death in Kashi is liberation.

Premchand, a local sari merchant, can attest to that. He has grown up on Harishchandra Ghat and has witnessed the cremation of people from far away lands such as Japan and Europe as well as those of nearby villages.

“This is my religion. Kashi is a place where you can get salvation,” said Premchand, who did not provide his last name. Kashi, meaning luminous, is the name locals and poets call Varanasi. It is also found in Hindu scriptures.

Here at Harishchandra Ghat, one of two cremation ghats that line the banks of the Ganga River, the local government built the electric crematorium more than 16 years ago. It came at a time when the government realized that people who could not afford to cremate their family members were often tying a rock to the dead body, taking it deep into the Ganga and throwing it overboard. The body would then join the other toxins—sewage, plastic, food and animal carcasses—to pollute the holy waters. The high levels of pollution propelled the government to invest millions of dollars to clean up the revered Ganga River. The government was also pressured to provide a more affordable way to dispose of homeless and family-less people who died in Varanasi, Premchand said. The electric crematorium was the answer.

The electric crematorium, which runs around the clock, is owned by the Choudhary family from the Dom caste. Members of the Dom caste are spread throughout India and most of them are weavers, scavengers or workers at cremation sites. Laloo Choudhary is one of them.

In his eight-hour shift that begins at 6 a.m., it is Choudhary’s duty to efficiently cremate the bodies in a furnace that heats to 630 degrees Celsius. On one recent day, four bodies came in. His highest daily count has been 16. Choudhary will only begin the funeral when the family shows either a death certificate from a hospital or a letter from the village leader proving the dead person’s identity. Then, of course, the 500 rupees; raised from 51 rupees from the time the crematorium first opened. After that, Choudhary turns the knob that heats the furnace.

“In 45 minutes, finish,” Choudhary said.

Prasad cannot wait for this long, because he must drive back to his village. So after 20 minutes, Choudhary walks down a flight of 14 steps to darkness. He collects a piece
of bone and some ashes to give to the family. The family then disperses the ashes in the Ganga, the final step for the soul to achieve moksha. The next morning, Choudhary will disperse the rest of the ashes.

In a wood cremation, it takes about 360 kilograms of wood to fully burn a body, but most locals cannot afford the price: 140 rupees per 40 kilograms. For this reason, wood merchants often sell hybrid wood logs for cheaper, so locals can buy them. Furthermore, some family members do not bother to purchase the sandalwood, saffron and clarified butter needed for the funeral ceremony. With limited money, family members have to make sacrifices if they want a wood pyre funeral. This is why it is no surprise that 200 bodies are daily burned on the cremation grounds Harishchandra Ghat said Samir Mathur, a local guide. Burning pyres mark the dark sky in the lone hours of the night in Varanasi.

While most Hindus are less likely to cremate their loved ones at the electric crematorium, they like to have it as a choice. In Prasad’s case, a cost cut.

“The person who has money, their body is burning. The person who does not have money, their body is burning too,” Choudhary put it simply.

Back at the electric crematorium, Prasad sprinkles sandalwood on his dead mother. He lights two incense sticks and circles her head with them five times, one for each of the five elements in the body, Premchand explains.

Choudhary pushes the body into the nine-foot long furnace. There is a swastika painted on the furnace, an auspicious sign in Hinduism. Prasad slips his sandals on, keeping his eyes fixed on the furnace. No tears. No emotions. In half an hour, Prasad will return to Jaunpur, to join the rest of his family. For him, there is life after death.