



Pastoral and Missional Reflections of Asian North American Congregational Experiences

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Abstract “Pastoral and Missional Reflections of Asian North American Congregational Experiences” identifies a set of key issues and challenges HANA churches encounter today. The article aims to offer readers a deeper understanding of the spiritual contexts in which Asian North American congregations serve and grow.

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INTRODUCTION

Post-1965 immigration has greatly reshaped the religious landscape of the United States, including that of Christianity. Currently, more than two-thirds of immigrants identify themselves as Christians, regularly participating in ethnic-specific immigrant churches. This phenomenon contributes to what one sociologist calls the “de-Europeanization of American Christianity.”¹ If so, why do such a significant number of recent immigrants and their children choose to participate in their ethnic immigrant churches? In particular, how do these congregations assist their members and their children with the precarious project of identity construction, as they seek to understand how their racial/ethnic identities intersect with their spiritual identity? Finally, given their unique social location, how do Asian American churches understand their mission in today’s world of racialization and globalization?

SERVING FIRST-GENERATION IMMIGRANTS: MULTIPLE ROLES OF THE CHURCH

While local churches may function solely as centers of worship in their home countries, Asian immigrant congregations play a far wider range of roles as they seek to assist their members with adapting in a new land while preserving their ethnic identity. As a spiritual institution, one of the vital functions the Asian immigrant church performs is to enable its members to find meaning and a source of strength in their experience of “dislocation.” Both the frequency and intensity of spiritual gatherings help congregation members to overcome the various challenges of immigrant life, as they are regularly reminded that God has a special calling for them and their immigrant congregations.²

In addition to its spiritual function, the Asian immigrant church also performs a number of critical “non-religious” functions to meet the particular needs of its members. First, it provides its lonely immigrant members with a deep sense of belonging and psychological comfort. As they gather regularly for both

¹ R. Stephen Warner, “Coming to America: Immigrants and the Faith They Bring,” *The Christian Century*, February 10, 2004, 20–23.

² Sang Hyun Lee, “Called to be Pilgrims: Toward an Asian American Theology from the Korean Immigrant Perspective.” In *Korean American Ministry: A Resource Book*, Sang Hyun Lee and John V. Moore, 1993, 90–120. (Louisville: General Assembly Council, Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. 1993.)

official and informal gatherings, immigrant members and their children are able to deepen their relationships with others from the same ethnic background and to enjoy their shared cultural practices and artifacts. Because they are often the only ethnic institutions that meet regularly and frequently, for many Asian immigrant families, their ethnic immigrant churches serve as their most important, if not the only, ethnic community to which they belong.

In addition, the Asian immigrant church also functions as a key social service agency, providing a wide range of services ranging from providing information about employment and housing opportunities to classes that help its members prepare for the U.S. citizenship examination. Particularly, most churches are intentional about meeting the multigenerational needs of immigrant families, recognizing many significant pressure points these families encounter. Many congregations, therefore, provide services for their elderly members. These programs aim to offer a sense of connectedness and of being honored to the aging, a group of individuals who feel particularly isolated and often neglected in a foreign land. At the same time, these churches also offer programs for second-generation children, seeking to introduce them to various aspects of their ethnic culture and to help them develop a positive view of their ethnic heritage and identity. For many second-generation adolescents, the Asian immigrant church and its youth ministry play a particularly seminal role in their formation of ethnic identity.

REACHING OUT TO THE SECOND GENERATION: A REVERSAL OF THE “SILENT EXODUS”?

Since the majority of current Asian immigrants came to the United States after 1965, the first wave of their American-born children have entered adulthood. Influenced by American culture and its social values, these young adults are asserting their ideas, claiming their rights, and even challenging their parents' traditional value systems and practices. Many embattled Asian Americans and their families turn to their ethnic churches for guidance and direction; many immigrant churches are, however, unable to help since they are also embroiled in similar intergenerational conflicts. Discouraged by their current church experiences of subordination to first-generation leadership and bleak future prospects without hope of change, many frustrated second-generation Asian American church leaders and members have begun to desert their immigrant churches in growing numbers since the early 1990s.³

Recent studies indicate that while the “silent exodus” of second-generation young people is continuing, many young people are not permanently disassociating from their ethnic churches. While some are joining pan-Asian American churches or predominantly white mega churches, a significant number of them are intentionally affiliating with a growing number of English-speaking Asian ethnic congregations that are independent from their ethnic immigrant churches.⁴ These congregations are growing in many U.S. metropolitan areas as they attract a growing number of second-generation young people who are seeking a community in which they can continue their spiritual journey in their own way while also working on their bicultural ethnic identity. Corporately, these emerging congregations also seek to develop their own distinctive congregational identity and mission, selectively appropriating certain theological and cultural resources from Asian immigrant churches as well as from the broader ecclesial community. While holding on to their unique second-generation Asian American congregational identities, these autonomous English-speaking congregations also seek to welcome those who come

³ Helen Lee, “Silent Exodus: Can the East Asian Church in America Reverse the Flight of Its Next Generation?” (*Christianity Today*, August 1996, 50–52.)

⁴ Sharon Kim, *A Faith of Our Own: Second-Generation Spirituality in Korean American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2010).

from other ethnic/racial backgrounds, thus gradually expanding the group boundary and incrementally reshaping their group identity.⁵

Surprisingly, there are also indications that a growing number of second-generation adults who have previously attended predominantly white congregations or pan-ethnic Asian American churches for many years are returning to their ethnic congregations, including the aforementioned English-speaking congregations that are a part of a larger Asian immigrant church.⁶ One significant reason why second-generation Asian Americans have an evolving relationship with their ethnic church is because as they go through different life stages, their view toward their own ethnic identity and thus toward their own ethnic community of faith continuously changes. As second-generation Asian Americans who are parenting children entering adolescence, a period in which the construction of identities—including ethnic identity—become significant, many are returning to Asian immigrant churches to offer their children a community in which they can explore and develop their own ethnic identities. Furthermore, as they play an increasing role in caring for their aging first-generation parents, these second-generation adults look for churches that can meet the needs of the multiple generations in their families.⁷

For the moment, many second-generation Asian American congregations, whether they are independent of or connected to Asian immigrant “mother” churches, are experiencing steady growth. Based largely on the past experiences of European immigrant churches, many had assumed that Asian American churches would either gradually disappear as the number of first-generation immigrants declined or they would become significantly “de-ethnicized.” However, unexpected growth and signs of the reversal of the “Silent Exodus” cause one to pause and think more reflectively about the complex intersection of race, ethnicity, and religion in the United States and the future of Asian American churches.

ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION AND PASTORAL IMPLICATIONS

For first-generation Asian immigrants—those who came to the United States as adults—their identity is strongly anchored in their Asian traditional cultures, having been reinforced by their growing-up experiences in their homeland. For most American-born second-generation young people, however, their understanding of “who I am” is not a given. For in a racially diverse setting like the United States, one’s identity formation involves the dialectical process of self-ascription and the ascription of others, an ongoing labeling and negotiating process engaged in by oneself and others.⁸ To put it differently, one’s identity construction involves a continual negotiation between the designation of outsiders (“what *they* think your identity is”) and one’s own self-assertion (“what *you* think your identity is”).

More importantly, for “visible” minorities living in a racialized setting like the United States, this dialectical process can be costly and detrimental since the identity designation of outsiders often contests and even negates one’s own self-ascription.⁹ During the past two centuries, Asian Americans have encountered

⁵ Antony W. Alumkal, *Asian American Evangelical Churches: Race, Ethnicity, and Assimilation in the Second Generation* (El Paso: LFB Scholarly Publishing, 2003).

⁶ Peter Cha, “Constructing New Intergenerational Ties, Cultures, and Identities among Korean American Christians.” In *This Side of Heaven: Race, Ethnicity, and Christian Faith*, eds. Robert J. Priest and Alvaro L. Nieves (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

⁷ Peter Cha, “The Reversal of the ‘Silent Exodus?’” (paper presented at the Conference of Sociology of Religion, the University of Illinois at Chicago, 2007).

⁸ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); Joane Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal: Red Power and the Resurgence of Identity and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

⁹ Mary Waters, “Ethnic and Racial Identities of Second-Generation Black Immigrants in New York City,” in *The New Second Generation*, ed. Alejandro Portes, 171–96 (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996).

various forms of racism, experiences that have directly shaped their identities as well as their understanding of their own social location.¹⁰ As Asian Americans continuously heard voices from mainstream society which sought to categorize them and label them—ranging from “yellow peril” to “model minority”—their personhood was assaulted again and again.¹¹

From their early childhood years, many Asian Americans internalized various messages of racism, becoming convinced of their “inferior” identity status in American society. A third-generation Japanese American Christian leader, reflecting upon his formative experiences, writes:

On that 1–10 scale many of us live by, white folk were always a 10. I was convinced, as an Asian American, that the highest I could ever hit was a 7. I grew up in a predominantly white suburb in the San Francisco Bay area. It was clear to me, even as a child, that whites set the standards and I had to fit into their society if I was going to prosper, or even just survive.... I was embarrassed by my Japanese heritage. I wanted to be as white as I could. White was right. Japanese was not.¹²

His painful experience of racial self-hatred and denial, regrettably, is not an isolated phenomenon. The negative self-image many Asian American youth have of themselves, according to Asian American psychologists, is one of the most critical counseling issues that face Asian American communities.¹³

Asian Americans do not cease to wrestle with these challenges when they move into young adulthood and adulthood; many continue to struggle with them, albeit in different ways and forms. In a highly racially stratified society like the United States, the identities of individuals in racial minorities change in a complex manner, according to variations in the situations and audiences encountered.¹⁴ Always carrying a “portfolio of ethnic identities,” these individuals learn to put on a socially and culturally defined “appropriate” identity for a given setting. In other words, “who they are” is often determined by “whom they are with” at the moment. While many Asian American individuals may appear to succeed in this “land of opportunity,” feelings of emptiness and existential angst mount as their understanding of who they are continually shifts and evolves and as they struggle to resist and negotiate with the “outsiders” designation of who they are.

Given the socio-cultural setting in which many Asian American individuals struggle to form and negotiate their identity described above, what are some of the theological and pastoral implications for the Asian American church? In his works, Sang Hyun Lee, a first-generation Korean American theologian, argued that the theology of an immigrant church must seek to answer the existential question, “What is the real meaning of our immigrant existence in America?”¹⁵ If indeed the theology of first-generation immigrants is guided by the question of “why are we here?”, the primary question with which second-generation Asian Americans are struggling is an even more fundamental one, namely one of identity: “Who am I as an individual and who are we as a corporate group?” The vulnerable and precarious nature of their identity formation project makes the church’s support and response even more urgent. Given the context and the critical need, how can the church serve and assist their members with their formation of identities? At the

¹⁰ Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from A Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1989).

¹¹ Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in Popular Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).

¹² Paul Tokunaga, “Introduction: Learning Our Names,” in *Following Jesus without Dishonoring Your Parents*, Jeanette Yep et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 9–10.

¹³ Laura Uba, *Asian Americans: Personality Patterns, Identity, and Mental Health* (New York: Guilford Press, 1994), 113–14.

¹⁴ Felix M. Padilla, *Latino Ethnic Consciousness: The Case of Mexican Americans and Puerto Ricans in Chicago* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

¹⁵ S. Lee, 40.

same time, how should Asian American congregations work on their own distinct corporate identities that reflect God's unique calling for them?

ASIAN AMERICAN CHURCHES' MISSIONAL ENGAGEMENT: FROM LAMENT TO HOPE

Many Asian American evangelical churches have often uncritically identified themselves as "American evangelicals," thus embracing the white evangelicals' political ideology as well as their theological ethos.¹⁶ One of the consequences of that identification is that these congregations, much like white American evangelicalism, tend to have a truncated vision of the mission of the church, seeing it primarily, if not exclusively, as that of the saving of souls through evangelism (Emerson and Smith, 2001). This religious phenomenon is particularly disturbing since, like other racial minority churches in the United States, Asian American churches did not participate in what Martin Marty called the "Two Party Split," the fragmentation of the American Protestant church into a socially active liberal wing and an "other-worldly-focused" fundamentalist wing, a fragmentation which has significantly shaped today's evangelical ethos and practice. Many Asian American "evangelical" congregations' theological identity and their missional orientations, in short, have been largely shaped by a historical experience that is not their own.

As mentioned earlier, Asian immigrant churches have historically offered a wide range of vital ministries, including the provision of various social services, to meet the needs of not only their church members but also of their ethnic communities at large. At the same time, due to language and cultural barriers, ministries of these immigrant churches were often confined to their own ethnic settings. With the emergence of English-speaking Asian Americans and of Asian American churches, however, this restriction can and should be lifted, enabling Asian American churches to provide holistic ministry to any individual or people groups that are in need. Having experienced the pains of being marginalized and of feeling powerless, Asian American Christians and churches particularly can offer ministries of mercy and justice to those who are in need with empathy and humility.

Indeed, one of the encouraging developments within the Asian North American Christian community is the growing number of younger ANA Christians and churches that are intentionally embracing the "Wholistic Gospel," committed to the task of both evangelism and the ministry of justice. During the past two decades, for instance, two evangelical communities that have experienced a dramatic growth of Asian Americans in their midst are InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, a collegiate parachurch organization, and the Evangelical Covenant Church, a relatively small but growing denomination.¹⁷ It is not coincidental that these two evangelical organizations explicitly and prominently express their deep commitment to the whole Gospel; it is not accidental that a growing number of Asian Americans hold prominent leadership positions in these two evangelical communities.

In the final chapter of the Book of Genesis, Joseph tells His older brothers who had sold him to merchants many years before, "You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Genesis 50:20). The Asian American church and its members, having been shaped by personal and corporate experiences of marginalization, are perhaps uniquely positioned to be used by God as a "channel" of His grace, healing, and Shalom in today's broken world. Our collective memories and experiences of pain point to the hope of how God might redeem these experiences for His Kingdom purposes. Indeed, for Asian American churches to serve as

¹⁶ Russell Jeung, *Faithful Generations: Race and New Asian American Churches* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ In 1990, there were approximately 25 full-time IVCF staff workers who came from Asian American backgrounds. By 2006, this number had increased to 145. In 1997, the first English-speaking Asian American church joined the Evangelical Covenant Church. Since then, more than forty Asian American congregations have decided to join this denomination.

“wounded healers” may be a significant part in the process of the de-Europeanization of American Christianity.

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