



Formation of Lay Leadership

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Abstract “Formation of Lay Leadership” reflects on a set of key issues that both Hispanic and Asian North American churches face in the formation of lay leadership in the faith community.

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SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HISPANIC AND ASIAN NORTH AMERICAN EXPERIENCES

A gathering of Hispanic North American (HNA) and Asian North American (ANA) Christian leaders in May 2013 brought to light several similarities and differences with regard to the identification and development of lay leaders in and beyond church contexts. Stories of economic struggles in their parent countries, the diversity of languages and cultures, and disconnections between generations, brought common understanding and empathy. However, stories of how potential young leaders are identified, encouraged, trained, and empowered for ministry were very different. These similarities and differences led to many shared learnings both of each another’s ethnic lenses as well as the different ways our biblical narrative is lived out culturally.

Many ANA families, especially those from East and Southeast Asia, are second- or third- generation Americans, so their recent history of immigration deeply shapes their personal and vocational values and goals. Like other ethnic groups, many Asians immigrate to North America in search of a better life and future. First-generation ANAs often endure seasons of economic struggle, language challenges, prejudice, and menial jobs in order for their children and grandchildren to enjoy the benefits of North American citizenship and economic stability.

Second-generation ANAs are often told to study hard, attend universities, and obtain white-collar jobs. Education is often seen as the key to economic mobility, so many young adult ANAs grew up working diligently to achieve good grades and higher education.¹ They carry with them the pressure to provide for their parents financially in appreciation of the sacrifices made for them. Status and financial prosperity became a sign of filial piety, the culturally Confucian virtue of duty, obedience, honor, and care of one’s parents.

Over the years, marginalization and the pressure to be a “model minority” often led ANA families to join local Christian churches, forsaking their Buddhist or Confucian backgrounds. The local church became

¹ In *Pulpit & Pew: Asian American Religious Leadership Today* (Durham: Duke Divinity School, 2005), p.9, T. Tseng reports that in 2000, almost half of ANAs earned a bachelor or graduate degree compared to only 30% of non-Hispanic Whites. ANAs as a whole were also reported to have the highest household income of any American racial group.

the center of cultural gatherings and social and professional networking. For older ANAs the local church provided a means of regaining the social status, community respect, and honor they lost by immigrating to a new country.

As for the Hispanic North American community, we can find a diverse immigrant experience that can vary from being a fifth generation born in the United States where our roots to this land can be traced back to when this land was Mexico, to the constant flow of recent immigrants from Mexico, Central, and South America. We find Latinos fully acculturated and assimilated into dominant society as well as finding communities of Latinos who are monolingual Spanish with limited interaction with dominant society. The immigrant community has come north with the hope of working and sending remittance to families left behind as they struggle financially in their native land. First-generation Latinos often work in low-wage, undesirable jobs in order to save as much as possible to pay for their loved ones to also make their way north.

Most Latinos come from a traditional Catholic faith and it is in their North American experience that they encounter an evangelical faith that empowers them to experience Christ in a more personal way. Second- and third-generation Latinos have often made their way out of high crime, low-income housing communities, and through their efforts have found some hope in attaining the American dream. We find the center of the Latino community to be around family. For those who have committed to a church, it is the church members that become the extended family.

AFFIRMING THE CALL TO MINISTRY

Church roles and positions such as that of Pastor, Elder, or Deacon are held in high esteem in the ANA community, often a reflection of the Asian cultural values of hierarchy and patriarchy. However, the call to full-time ministry often comes at a cost. Full-time church work does not usually provide financial income comparable to other professional vocations, such as engineering, medical, or business professions.² The need to raise funds for full-time missionary work is often seen as something shameful, as though one were “begging” from friends and relatives. When ANA lay leaders feel led into full-time ministry, they must overcome feelings of shame or dishonor and wrestle with their sense of duty to provide financially for their parents as part of their “American Dream.”

Therefore, when young ANA leaders merely explore full-time ministry, one of their greatest deterrents is how their parents will respond to their choices. Even faithful ANA Christian parents wrestle with wanting their children to be fully devoted to God and yet fearing that their children will experience the same economic challenges their parents or grandparents endured. These Christian parents cannot help but feel a sense of concern, sadness, and even anger when their adult children disclose their desire to be in campus ministry, the pastorate, or on the mission field. Parents feel their children are “throwing away” their education and potential in order to work in lesser-paying jobs. Some parents will see a decision to move into full-time ministry as “dishonoring” the sacrifices they have made to give their children expensive college and even post-college education.

Much of the Asian community is not Christian, so friends and family will often view seminary and full-time ministry as irresponsible, frivolous, and a waste of the sacrifices a family has made for their children. Christian parents may endure the criticism and pressure of their peers and pass these criticisms on to their children. Therefore, young ANA Christians often pursue the call of full-time ministry without their parents’ full affirmation or blessing.

² In *Honoring the Generations* (Valley Forge: Judson Press, 2012), 174-5, J. Chung and A. Tizon describe the ANA quest for the American Dream and commitment to a work ethic that promises prosperity, security, comfort, and self-actualization. This goal of financial success is often in direct opposition with the call to full-time ministry.

There seems to be a significant contrast here with the Hispanic community in North America. The HNA Christian community consists primarily of first- and second-generation Americans who often do not have the option of full-time ministry or the resources to attend seminary or even college. It is much more common for young HNA leaders to be called into bi-vocational ministry than into the mission field, campus ministry, or full-time pastorates. As a result, these potential pastors do not face the same kind of financial challenges or expectations from their families.

Unlike the Asian community, the Hispanic community is largely sympathetic to the Christian faith, whether Catholic or Protestant. So when a young HNA adult feels led into bi-vocational ministry, their calling becomes an added blessing to their communities. The parents of these young leaders seem to feel honored by God, as they release their children to do Kingdom work and support the saying, “Nothing is better than ministry.” Those in bi-vocational roles in the church usually continue to work in local businesses or in jobs that develop their communities. Their faith community therefore rallies behind such individuals and families, celebrating with them and expecting God to bless them for their faithfulness.

What can we learn from these two different responses to God’s calling of young leaders into ministry? What would happen if ANA Christians adjusted their expectations for financial success, comfort, and security, learning to bless and develop their cities and neighborhoods as well as their families? What if the Asian faith community developed more bi-vocational rather than full-time ministry opportunities? What would it look like for ANA Christians to truly believe Jesus’ call in Matthew 6:24–34 to “seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well”? On the other hand, what are we to learn from the ANA lay leadership style of calling? The seriousness and the commitment one takes in preparing for leadership roles is a reflection of one’s desire to be responsive to God’s calling by willingly sacrificing one’s own time, money, and financial security.

IDENTIFYING POTENTIAL LEADERS IN THE CHURCH

The ways that potential leaders in the church are identified, encouraged, and supported by the Hispanic faith community also differs from that of the Asian faith community. The potential of a HNA youth or young adult is often first identified by fellow church members, including youth workers or spiritual matrons in the community. These young leaders are then quickly taken to the local pastor for discipleship and mentoring. The pastor takes time to get to know the youth or young adult and brings them along to various activities such as church outreaches and home visitations. The potential leader is given several opportunities to minister alongside their pastor, learning to preach and share the gospel as well. Discipleship and mentoring of young leaders is often done one-on-one with a local pastor or evangelist. Young leaders are often prayed over and commissioned early so that the entire faith community can come alongside them, providing encouragement, training, and counsel for them as well as for their families.

The spiritual gifts of senior pastor Urias Mendoza were identified by his faith community when he was only fifteen years old. He had quickly discerned God’s calling upon his life after his conversion. He was discipled by a local pastor until he felt sure of his commitment to become an evangelist himself. This process of conversion, calling, and conviction often happens quickly with in the HNA church.

Urias says, “The most important part of being a pastor is one’s calling. Calling is more valuable than [formal] education.” This calling must be recognized by the community through a consideration of that person’s spiritual gifts and “anointing” as well as their sense of leading from the Holy Spirit. Self-appointment or one’s personal sense of calling will not be effective without affirmation by the church. In fact, sometimes the church community and leadership recognize an anointing on someone before they do themselves.

Senior pastor Rene Molina agrees that calling should then be supported by training, stating, “Neither calling without preparation or preparation without calling is good. Both are needed.” The development of

one's character and spiritual formation, however, is a process that takes time and attention from spiritual leaders. Urias models his own form of mentoring after the relationship between Moses and Joshua, Paul and Timothy, and between Jesus and His disciples.

Most HNAs in our track gathering agree that the order of ministry starts first with a conversion, then the calling to ministry, then direct involvement in the ministry, and finally formal training to further develop their ministry.

In contrast, in Asian circles, the process of identifying potential leaders is more difficult and less public. Many Asian cultures value humility and conformity in ways that tend to hinder the affirmation of young leaders. ANA parents often place high expectations on their children to achieve good grades and excel at their extracurricular activities. In order to motivate their children, Asian parents often compare the successes of their children with the achievements of others. As a result, many ANA children grow up with feelings of inadequacy or the unshakable feeling that they must perform well in order to obtain affirmation or affection from others.³ Combined with the pressure to provide financially for their parents, many ANA youth and young adults find it difficult to explore ministry opportunities or even to see their own leadership potential. The fear of failure in a shame-based culture leads many potential ANA leaders to resist and even deny their gifts of preaching, teaching, and evangelism.

In ANA churches, when a potential leader is found, it takes some time before that person is publicly identified, both as a protection for them as well as church leadership. Not only do ANA potential leaders fear failure, but the pastors who mentor them are also cautious about affirming someone who has yet to be "tested." The potential leader is rarely disciplined, mentored one-on-one, or given leadership responsibilities until they have shown themselves faithful over one or more years. One-on-one discipleship and mentoring does not happen often, and when it does, it is usually done by lay leaders first.

Because of the lack of encouragement early in life, many potential leaders remain largely unaware of their strengths, spiritual gifts, or *charisma*. Even when they are, young ANA leaders are often unable to gain enough respect to bring needed change into their churches. Instead, these young leaders often learn and grow their spiritual gifts by observing other leaders, reading books, attending conferences, and taking the initiative to seek counsel on their own. Because their parents and families are often unchurched, many do not disclose their consideration of full-time ministry until they are much further along in their decision process.

What would happen if young, potential leaders in the ANA community were identified and celebrated earlier in life? How would God's Kingdom purposes be advanced if ANA leaders were less bound to the shame of failure as they were to the assurance that they are beloved children of God, regardless of their achievements?

THE EDUCATION AND DEVELOPMENT OF NEXT GENERATION LEADERS

Although ANA pastors are comfortable in the pulpit, many have never been personally disciple or mentored themselves. As a result, most do not feel adequate to mentor or disciple others one on one. Some are reluctant to have younger leaders "shadow" them, afraid that their shortcomings or failures will lose them respect in their churches. So when young ANA leaders respond to the call to full-time ministry, they are often directed to other lay leaders or seminary for a solid theological education. Although some receive funds from their denomination or church, many take five to ten years to personally pay for and complete their seminary education. As a result, potential ANA leaders are reluctant to take on the time and financial burden of seminary training before having a clear sense of their gifts and call. This keeps

³ Ibid., p.65. In *Honoring the Generations*, S. Kim and M.S. Park describe the way ANA students struggle with self-worth in meeting the high expectations for scholastic success in a shame-based and performance-driven culture.

many faithful believers from even exploring a call to become pastors, teachers, or other types of spiritual leaders.

The path toward pastoring in the local Hispanic church, however, does not usually require seminary training or even a college degree. Instead, the character, faithfulness, and spiritual gifts of young HNA leaders are what qualify them for ministry leadership. In fact, it is often only well-established pastors who have the financial means, available time, and the desire to take time away from ministry to be enrolled in seminary classes. These pastors often leave the daily operations of their churches to the capable hands of their associates for up to 6 months while they take time away to complete seminary training. Taking classes is a way to supplement, deepen, and enlarge a pastor's knowledge and influence.

What if the ANA faith communities did not put as much emphasis on seminary education as they did on real-life mentoring? What if experienced ANA pastors dedicated a greater portion of their week to personally investing in and training up next-generation leaders? What if more members of the ANA faith community dedicated themselves to personally coming alongside and coaching young leaders, humbly risking failure for the sake of growth and encouragement in the next generation? On the other hand, we must also ask how difficult formal education may be for HNA pastors when they are leading congregations and are needed in areas of community leadership. How would having formal education have impacted their ministry had they had these tools earlier in their response to the calling?

WOMEN LEADERS IN THE CHURCH

Gender roles within the ANA church context are similar to those within the Hispanic church context with a few exceptions. Although the emerging generation is moving toward more egalitarian views, both Asian and Hispanic cultures are strongly influenced by hierarchy and patriarchy. In the ANA church context, leadership roles such as pastors and elders are seldom given to women, regardless of their gifts and calling. Some of this is due to theological perspectives, but the lack of women leaders in the church seems to have more to do with social and cultural sensibilities.

The Confucian value of submission to one's husband for Asians often leads ANA women to deny their own leadership gifts. They believe exercising leadership will somehow make them less "desirable" for marriage. Like in most cultures, married women in the Asian culture are still seen as the primary caregivers of the family unit, so ministry responsibilities become secondary to the needs of their families. Therefore, in order to honor the men around them and maintain harmony within their families, ANA women often feel they need to "hold back" from leadership roles to keep from "shaming" their Christian husbands. In the Korean language, for instance, the word *sa-mo-neem* is used to describe a male pastor's wife. However, no such term exists for a female pastor's husband.

Younger female ANA leaders must also contend with values of hierarchy that hinder them from speaking truth or embracing leadership roles involving the oversight of men or those older than them. Without significant affirmation from their Christian "fathers" or "brothers," or even their extended faith community, young women leaders will seldom live out their true leadership potential in the church. Instead, emerging women ANA leaders often look outside their churches for opportunities to grow in leadership and ministry experiences. Capable ANA women find leadership positions more readily accessible in campus ministries, academia, non-profit, and secular jobs. It is often only after they have achieved a significant level of experience, education, or credibility, that their contributions to the church are more readily recognized.

Values of hierarchy and patriarchy and a theological stance that limits women's roles can also be found in the Hispanic church context. Although Hispanic women may be "invited" into leadership discussions, their opinions may not be respected and valued as much as those of the men. The historical and cultural elements of Latin "machismo" form a traditional model of leadership that invites strong personalities,

usually male, in the form of “benevolent dictatorships.” Although Hispanic women hope for change, they acknowledge the deep cultural values present with the saying, “It is what it is. It is not heaven yet.”

At the same time, because HNA women are able to serve as leaders in the church on a volunteer or bi-vocational basis, Hispanic churches are more open to accepting women as leaders and influencers [than ANA churches]. Pastor’s wives and older women who are prayer warriors are given respect because of their spiritual keenness and faithfulness. The HNA church also values the ability of many capable women to encourage, exhort, mobilize, and nurture the community of faith. A shared understanding of the strength and stability Hispanic women provide to their families and community gives HNA women a type of public respect in their churches that is not often found in the Asian context.

It is important to note that the role of HNA women in the church also varies by denomination and the views of both the local leaders and congregants. Denominational leaders in traditionally unsupportive women-in-leadership structures may become open to the idea based the lack of available men to lead. At the same time we are finding more and more Latina women in seminaries preparing to be pastors, theologians, and academic scholars. A network of HNA women has been established through the Hispanic Summer Program to provide support for these non-traditional roles.

How can both the HNA and ANA church more intentionally and practically honor the role of women in leadership in Christ’s church? How will women not just be invited into leadership conversations, but be given the authority and resources to affect change in and through the church? How must the spiritual fathers, husbands, and brothers in our faith communities exemplify Christ’s humility and sacrificially advocate for women to grow in their leadership gifts beyond cultural norms? Until both Hispanic and Asian American men make a conscientious effort to challenge their cultural roles of privilege and serve women as Christ served the church, women in both contexts will continue to struggle to live into the fullness of their ministry calling. It remains to be seen what potential transformation lies in the church that harnesses the strengths and insights of both genders.

Both the HNA and ANA churches can help each other see where cultural values must give way to biblical ones, and where our ethnic lenses must be transformed by the love and truth of the gospel. Our next generation leaders can be better served by a greater commitment to put God’s Kingdom first, above and beyond ethnic, gender, and generational stories.

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