



Intergenerational and Intercultural Issues

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Abstract “Intergenerational and Intercultural Issues” identifies a set of key issues that both Hispanic and Asian North American churches face, and how these two faith communities engage with intergenerational and intercultural issues.

Conde-Frazier, Elizabeth, and Andrew Y. Lee. 2015. Intergenerational and Intercultural Issues. *Common Ground Journal*. [v12 n1 Spring]. ISSN: 15479129. www.commongroundjournal.org. EDCOT. Form: eJournal. Pages: 67-74. Keywords: hana, intercultural, intergenerational, track.

WHAT ARE SOME KEY ISSUES YOUR TRACK ADDRESSED? WHY ARE THEY SIGNIFICANT?

One of the foremost issues shared by our Hispanic and Asian North American (HANA) participants was the **pain of lament** that cut across the spectrum, from the first to the 1.5 to the second generations. There was a common bond of experienced suffering. (The lament of the third generation is for the loss of language and identity as they search for their roots.) These pains are heavily shaped by the forces of immigration and political colonization.

In their native lands, people suffered under the hands of colonization whether the oppressor was Spain, Japan, the United States, England, France, etc. Foreigners ruled the land and dictated policy, imposing their standards and values as the norm where desired. Thus, many had to endure the pain and humiliation of being outsiders in their own homeland, marginalized and displaced from the center of power.

Even when one gets the opportunity to immigrate to the United States and reside in the heart of the Empire, paternalism was still present. Being of a different color, culture, and tongue leads to a different form of ostracization and prejudice. We are still ignored. Our needs are still unmet. We are not understood. We remain second-class citizens.

Entry into the United States leads to a life of double (or more) marginalization. One was neither accepted in America nor any longer in one's homeland. A native Puerto Rican female is called by the pejorative term, *spic*, when in New York, but labeled a *gringa* upon her return to Puerto Rico.

It is this question of **identity** that also emerged as a major element of the group's discussion. As 1.5- and second-generation persons, one is always the “perpetual foreigner” with a foot in two places but no firm ground on which to stand. A common tactic of immigrant children is to seek to adapt and assimilate to western ways. Though they may not have the tools to analyze their situation in a critical manner, they do implicitly recognize the power structure in place, so they naturally aspire to be like the majority and adapt to American culture.

The second generation learns English, serving as translators for their parents, and sometimes even handling bills and official correspondence for their home. Some do not wish to speak the language of

their parents as they desire to identify with the surrounding culture and fit in with their peers. In fact, children are encouraged to assimilate so that they can do well in America and demonstrate that they belong in this country.

The price of successful assimilation is confusion of identity. With whom do they belong? Westernized Asian Americans are pejoratively referred to as “bananas” or “twinkies.” Their Hispanic American counterparts are known as “coconuts” (a term also applied to Mexicans, Indians, and Filipinos). Fair-skinned Hispanics, such as some Argentinians and Cubans, are favored over those who are darker skinned, another vestige of European colonialism.

The landscape of church life is littered with horror stories about internecine clashes. Within HANA church culture, there are intercultural and intergenerational disagreements over matters of language, music, liturgy, polity, etc. Typically the immigrant generation takes center stage as the driving force behind planting churches. As children are born, ministries are begun to meet their needs. In most bilingual congregations, Spanish or an Asian dialect remains the official language of the church. Sermons are translated into English. Teaching is conducted from a first generation perspective so that the English speaking are not spiritually fed. Some churches refuse to allow translation and hold on to the mother tongue in an effort to replicate the church experience in their homeland.

Even when ministries are developed in English in parallel to those in the host language, as is the case in many ANA congregations, the second generation still feels as if they are second-class citizens with neither the power nor the privileges of their parents. The English speaking are often relegated to the margins and experience yet again the emotional pain of being outsiders as they are “different.”

This disparity is even more pronounced when comparing their roles in the worlds of work and church. Second generation adults may hold responsible positions in the secular world; they can be leaders in their companies and balance multimillion dollar budgets. But on Sundays, they are still viewed as children, even if they are married with children themselves. They are unable to make monetary decisions for even petty amounts due to church policies. Thus they find themselves in a powerless position. Even when some are appointed to the governing boards of the church, they find themselves in the familiar position of being the underrepresented minority. What voice they have is silenced by the vote of the majority.

Authority and control of the church are still tightly held by the parent generation. Senior pastors, with rare exception, are born overseas. Those who are brought to America to lead their churches are not savvy regarding their new cultural context. They need to first adjust to American immigrant church life. The gap in their understanding of the second generation is even greater due to their lack of experience in the American context.

With no remedy in sight for a malady that has afflicted HANA congregations for decades, young adults feel they have little choice except to leave. (Some have been threatened with blacklisting if they do leave.) It is no surprise, then, that the “silent exodus” that began in the 90s in ANA churches continues today and afflicts the entire HANA community.

HANA young adults leave the churches that birthed and nurtured them for greener pastures elsewhere. These range from churches that are English-speaking monoethnic H/ANA, to pan-H/ANA, to multicultural multiethnic, to monoculturally dominant churches (especially popular megachurches). This, in turn, prolongs the cycle of pain experienced by both generations.

The first generation sees their children leave and lament for this loss. They made many sacrifices in order to plant and grow their church but now they feel the second generation is deserting them and that their authority is disregarded and disrespected. They feel misunderstood by the second generation and conclude that the English speaking are an ungrateful generation.

On the other hand, the second generation lament the fact that their hybrid identity is not accepted by the parent generation. They cannot exercise all their gifts and fully contribute to the life of their church, as leadership is insufficiently shared. They are not accepted in general society and they discover that they are not accepted at church either.

The following is a second generation poem of lament.

*I came to church as a child
And I eagerly embraced the message of God's love for me.
I came to church as a teen
But the only place you had for me was still in Sunday School.
And you would only speak to me in a language I could not understand.
I came to church as a young adult
And the only place I was accepted was among my peers
Or through service by helping those younger than me.
I came to church as an adult
And little had changed.
"Speak only when spoken to."
"Don't rock the boat."
"You can't do that here."
"The table is already set. There is no place for you here,"
You would say, not with words but by your actions.
I came to church
And all I was fed were spiritual crumbs.
I went to church, an American church.
And there I was fed. I grew. I flourished. I found my voice.
But the longing in my heart is still for you.¹*

The following is a first generation poem of lament.

*Yo no queria estar aca
pero aca me trajiste
yo no queria venir
por que lo hiciste?
me sedujiste
me convenciste
me atrajiste
y me atrapaste;
y aqui estoy en tierra extrana
en tierra aborrecida
en tierra bendecida,
enterrada.
Extrano mi tierra
mi tierra aborrecida
mi tierra amada
donde estaba enterrada.
Mi pasado y mi historia,
mis raices y memorias
las rendi delante de tu trono
El Reino y sus propositos!*

¹ Written by Andrew Lee.

*El Rey y sus planes!
 Luchando, peleando,
 humillada y herida,
 diferente a todos
 a todos parecida.
 Quien me diera de beber
 del agua del pozo,
 del pozo de Jerusalem!
 exclamo David y tres
 corrieron a servirle.
 Yo clamo por mi pozo
 y por mi agua,
 pero no hay camino de retorno,
 la suerte esta echada...
 y mientras aqui vivo y aqui sufro
 sufro por mi esposo
 y su anoranza,
 por mis hijos,
 por mi iglesia,
 por mis hermanos latinos
 y su tristeza.
 Gimo, lucho y desespero.
 Espero, proclamo y deseo.
 Avanzo, abrazo y aguanto...
 Hasta cuando, Dios mio,
 Hasta cuando!²*

The author of this lament describes her experience as being in a land where she was brought to by God. God seduced her. This is a land where she is now trapped, a strange land that is hated and blessed at the same time. She misses and cries out for the land of her own wells and waters, her own history and memories. Yet she gave these up for the plans which God has for God's Kingdom. Like David she cries out for the waters of the wells of Jerusalem and while she lives in this new land she cries out, struggles and despairs, proclaims, advances, embraces and holds on while asking, "How long, Lord, how long?"

The pain for the familiar causes the first generation to make the church a place for holding onto the yearned and beloved past and to seek to recreate the different pieces of their country of origin. **Power and authority** are caught up in these purposes along with the evangelizing goals of the evangelical missionaries who taught them.

For the second generation the church is also an extended family that began the task of nurturing them, but when their journey of growth requires that they integrate the hybridity of their identity and that they make sense of it, they are met by rejection by the first generation. Their ideas, and therefore opportunities for contribution, are not accepted. They cannot grow their identities either as persons or as servant leaders. They find themselves in a community of persons that they both love and are deeply hurt by at the same time. They are welcomed when they need to translate and interpret the world for their parents but these very abilities are frowned upon in the church. The role reversal they live out with their parents, where they lead them into the processes of this new land countered by the first generation's grasping for control in the church, creates for the second generation an ever-growing wound.

² Written by Silvina Kosack.

While pain and lament characterize both generations, there is a **deficit in understanding** of each other by both parties, which results in further mistrust. Without the ability to communicate between the cultures, both generations suffer in pain and silence. The lack of forgiveness in the HANA churches is quite pronounced.

The undercurrent of grief and anguish in HANA churches stands in sharp contrast to the spirit of victory and triumphalism that permeates evangelical theology and thinking. Bigger crusades, growth numbers, large modern church facilities, and huge budgets are all attributed to God's blessing. These stories of triumph are held up as a paradigm to be imitated at conferences. Once more, those in the minority attempt to imitate those in power.

Yet another area of deep pain lies in the **gender disparity** between men and women. In HANA cultures, there is a top-down hierarchical polity that has been in place for several millennia. In both Confucian and machismo societies, men lead and women support. This has resulted in women being further marginalized in servile roles.

In modern western society, women have been striving for full equality in all areas of life. But within church life, changes to the existing power structure have been slow in coming. English-speaking females are less apt to be accepting of the status quo, leading to further conflict. Second-generation females find this gender discrimination in both worlds at different levels. In the western world they must learn to be more assertive and confident, which is surely considered disrespectful in their parents' world.

WHAT ARE SOME SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN HOW HISPANIC AND ANA CHURCHES EXPERIENCE AND ENGAGE WITH THESE ISSUES?

There are many similarities between the two groups, even in their ways of non-engagement of the major issues as detailed above. One reason is that neither have a strong language of emotional discourse. The routines of survival do not afford the time for one to internally reflect and process, much less with one another. The need to be strong for one another also compounds the situation. Their inner lives are a secret to one another. Confucian philosophy emphasizes fulfilling one's role and doing what is right and virtuous. One is not prone to speak about emotions and feelings. Likewise, a machismo society emphasizes the virility of a man who acts and leads. Kindness, truthfulness, and compassion are considered feminine, and thus, weaker, values.

Both communities need to find the vocabulary to express their intergenerational stories so that each generation can hear each other's stories of lament and hope.

One difference between the two communities lies in the area of social justice. While the poor exist in HANA populations, those from the ANA group have an overall higher per capita income, with a number residing in affluent areas and maintaining a corresponding lifestyle. On the whole, evangelical ANA communities do not speak out enough for social justice and neglect the poor. They need to learn from Hispanic churches how to better engage in this area.

WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES THAT BOTH GROUPS FOUND HELPFUL IN LIGHT OF THE ISSUES AFOREMENTIONED?

Finding common strategies was not easy. We listened at great length to each other. There was much empathy as we listened. The subject at hand was one where life or death was at stake. We made a list of the subjects which the different group members felt were important to talk about. The list covered personal, cultural, and historical issues that led to immigration and its effects. Different group members began the conversations and we all joined in with insights and knowledge. These conversations gave us context for the task of finding ways to help both generations speak to one another.

Practices from the different communities represented by the members were offered for discussion and critique. The group was composed of both first and second generation members so that the discussion at hand was in itself a practice in exploration. We found that a spiritual gift to be developed for the second generation was patience, and for the first it was humility so as to listen to the second.

LAMENT AND COMING TO KNOWLEDGE

The journey of lament into hope led us to the histories that shaped the individual stories of the generations. We realized that the pain of lament, felt across the spectrum of the generations, was shaped by immigration and political colonization in our respective countries of origin. Lament became a way of coming to a knowledge that moved to understanding. When the generations express their hurts to each other they come to an understanding of their common journey. Lament is a way of looking into the life of the other and feeling connected to each other so that we can struggle together and not against each other. We found that this common struggle led to solidarity—their suffering is a shared experience. There is wisdom in the communal memory of our storytelling.

Shifting Toward Hope

This is an important shift toward hope. Our group spoke about several ways to come together in a new way. Both generations can speak of God in their stories. Better yet, we thought about creating a setting where both could experience God together and share their “God talk.”

A practical example for making this happen is an intergenerational mission trip where both generations experience God’s power together in serving. After the experience, the reflection of what took place during the trip is a way of continuing to share testimonies and how they have grown in their faith. This creates an appreciation for the faith and gifts they both have and how these can form their community as a congregation. Trust begins to take place differently because of this type of appreciation.

Another example offered by the group was to hold a baptism service between the two congregations, in instances where the generations have formed separate language-based congregations. Once again, sharing faith stories and serving each other would help people see each other as real, each with a name and a participant in God’s work. Group members who had been a part of such experiences spoke of how respect emerged.

Respect is key for the ongoing relationship and for building toward hope. Respect leads to honor—the second generation honoring the first. Respect also leads to empowerment where the first empowers the second generation by releasing their (the first generation’s) power so that the next generation can share in the legacy of the calling to serve God. In this we learn acceptance, remaining with each other instead of running from each other and we trust both God and each other.

Even for young people who may lack authority, there is still the opportunity to be creative. For example, some of our group members suggested doing a talk show during Valentine’s Day, bringing in the first generation to speak in front of the second about their relationships and the struggles and hopes of love. The attempt here is to create a safe space for both to speak candidly with one another in order to build some trust.

As we considered the issues of power and authority and the ways that cultural practices keep these in place, we concluded that a leader in authority from the first generation is needed who can lead the first generation into creating a space for the second to find its expression and to contribute to the making of the community of the whole congregation. This leader needs to use their power and authority to persuade others of the first generation of the value of the contributions the second generation can make for all in this new land.

This leader must also spend much time truly listening to and earning the trust of the second generation. The conversation between the leader and those perceived as youth will become a new space where the two generations encounter each other. This space is where the elements necessary for creating a place for negotiation and new birth between and for both generations begins. In this space, hybrid significations are created using the symbols, memories, pain, and hopes and dreams of both generations. It is a very slow and precarious journey into the future together.

The preaching, teaching, and strategic planning of the leader in advisement with leaders from both generations is essential. The scriptures have much to offer us in this way. Much of the Old Testament takes place or is redacted during the experience of the exile when Israel also needed to find ways to maintain its language, culture, and values which were embedded in their religious practices. It is believed that when they were far from the temple and unable to maintain the worship experience of sacrifices and such, that the synagogue emerged as a teaching and worship center. A first-generation leader who wishes to lead the congregation into a viable future that maintains its second and subsequent generations must interpret the scriptures in ways that will open up the future and the life that it can hold. Faith is redefined in light of understanding its purpose. Mission is refashioned so that the meaning of evangelism is expanded to include economic empowerment and/or social service. New symbols will emerge that will embrace the new meanings and ways for both generations to live, worship, and serve together.

How does such a first-generation leader emerge? How does someone attain the capacity to listen empathetically to a second generation while being and experiencing the writhing pain of the first generation and thus experiencing the writhing pain that everyone else is experiencing? Here is where culturally appropriate theological education becomes a resource. Bible institutes offer traditional skills and areas of knowledge while seminaries offer a decontextualized education for these communities. Workshops, courses, and conferences that are not interruptive to life schedules and help people reflect on the issues discussed are most effective. Pastoral care for the leaders that helps them deal with how the trauma of immigration has affected them and their families, while also teaching them the skills for working with their own communities, can be a resource.

In our group there were also second-generation leaders. One had been mentored for the position. He and his father (a first-generation pastor) had found a way to struggle through and transition into the passing of power from one generation to the other. Another leader with a strong empathic heart had learned to be pastoral to the first generation, understanding the sacrifice it would mean for him and for his generation. If there isn't a *vínculo* or special bond between the two generations in the creation of leadership and passing of the baton, then life does not have a way of passing between the two.

During our time together as a group, the two different generations spoke candidly, and the pain which accompanies anger emerged. There were moments of separation between us as well as being at a loss as to what to do. It made us meek. Meekness is when we have power but we restrain our power and our defenses so that mercy may walk through. Mercy makes us wise.

As we reflect on what took place, a word that is difficult to swallow comes to mind—longsuffering. It invites us to great patience in moments when we are impatient, intolerant, oversensitive, and angry due to the trauma of immigration. It is the type of patience that leads to restraint so that we can listen. It invites us to speak softly because we are all hurting. It invites us to trust God between us when we can't trust one another. This means that we will follow God's leading so that we can repent, so that repentance can continue to open the way for us to forgive one another and to continue to walk together in reconciliation. Reconciliation means finding constructive ways to approach one another. It is a two-way street. It cannot take place if all parties are not actively engaged in the process.

SIGNS OF HOPE

When these steps in the journey take place, hope begins to take form. Our group defined the signs of hope in our midst in the following ways:

“You are precious where you are,”

“Accept where you are,”

“Fellowship is taking place,”

“Accept who you are as well as who others are,”

“Bear fruit,”

“We are a becoming countercultural church that shows the values of the *basileia*,”

“We understand that different seasons will take place and we are willing to weather them.”

Hope comes through lament and from lament. The possibility of hope comes from collaboration, trust, faith, and learning from each other. Hope waits while preparing, and praying continuing in patience. “[T]herefore put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, long suffering, bearing with one another, forgiving one another...” (Eph. 4:1-3).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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