



Public Witness and the HANA Community

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Abstract “Public Witness and the HANA Community” explores key issues that both Hispanic and Asian North American churches face as part of public witness as a faith community.

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INTRODUCTION

The Hispanic and Asian North American (HANA) Christian community’s expression of public witness arises from the common experience as lamenting communities on an exodus-like journey. Both communities share a common immigrant narrative. Within this narrative there are significant stories of suffering that are often ignored in light of an American narrative of success and triumphalism. The immigrant church in both the Hispanic and Asian expressions have an opportunity to contribute a lived theological experience to the larger story of Christianity in North America. In particular, the immigrant story acknowledges a multi-layered experience within the North American narrative.

The church is called to bear faithful witness of the gospel of Jesus Christ to the world. For a significant portion of North American church history, Christian witness has been limited to an individualistic expression. To bear witness became synonymous with personal evangelism. Public witness, however, should be expressed beyond the individual realm. Public witness engages the public and not just the private world of the individual. Public witness presents a Christian voice and perspective into the world.

The public witness of the church requires recognition of the validity of the voice of the community. In the public sphere, voices are not heard unless they are expressed aloud. But as stated in the previous article on the theology of lament, the stories of the immigrant communities have remained hidden. In particular, the stories of the immigrant generation of both the Hispanic and Asian North American communities have been silenced.

On one level, this silence may reflect the desire of the immigrant generation (or the more popular designation of “first generation”) to remain under the radar and not make waves. First generation immigrants may often view themselves as guests in a foreign land, who should not have a voice in larger society. This silence, however, is to the detriment of authentic Christian public witness.

The first generation has struggled through the trauma of the immigrant experience. The loss of cultural identity, social familiarity, and a sense of security contribute to the social, psychological, and emotional trauma of the immigrant. The immigrant’s world is turned upside down. The familiar social order back home is upended in the United States. Even in dealing with one’s own family, the first generation immigrant experiences social and cultural dis-ease. Second-generation children can be elevated above their parents in North American society. The security of a familiar family dynamic is disrupted by the

elevation of the children above the parents. The first-generation immigrant with limited language skills may depend on the second generation to handle basic communication (with the school, the phone company, the government, etc.), which challenges the existing social order of the family. Migration to the United States often lowers the social standing of the immigrant generation. The immigrant generation experiences multiple challenges to family security in the process of immigration.

The physical act of an immigrant journey and the emotional, spiritual act of crossing over, whether across a vast ocean or a national boundary, parallels the exodus story of Scripture. The exodus experience of the Hispanic and Asian immigrant has proved to be a difficult experience. While acquiring the American dream may present as a noble goal, ultimately, the elusive nature of that dream can leave the immigrant disillusioned after much suffering and trauma. The immigrant community experiences the pain of being outsiders while also being continually taunted and tempted to become insiders. The liminal identity of the immigrant reflects their marginalization. As a community that will have a great deal of difficulty in being accepted as truly American, while at the same time, being lured to live the glorified lifestyle of the American, the immigrant suffers a marginalized, liminal existence.

The suffering of the immigrant generation does not have to be wasted. In a Christianity that honors the power of lament and the power of suffering in forming an authentic community, the voices of suffering are essential. Unfortunately, the narrative of suffering, which can serve as an important aspect of the public witness of the church, has been silenced in lieu of a triumphalistic narrative.

Even as the first generation has been silent, the second generation may have a greater opportunity to tell the story that the first generation has not been able to express. The second generation will often possess a more stable standing in society with a greater degree of assimilation. The assertion of the voice of the second generation could potentially serve as a prophetic public witness, and could reveal the voice of the first generation. The second generation could learn these stories of suffering and struggle beyond merely the outer expressions of cultures such as foods and holiday customs. The voice of the second generation, therefore, should not reflect the voice of the dominant culture or be co-opted by the expectations of majority culture.

For example, for the Asian American community, the exploitation of the model minority myth by the dominant culture has been detrimental to the Asian American public witness. The prophetic witness of the Asian American Christian community is stifled when that voice is seen as simply mirroring and affirming the values of the dominant culture. By reclaiming the stories of the first generation, the second generation can speak the prophetic word of lament and suffering into the North American context. In other words, the second generation should not so easily shirk the mantle of otherness. Otherness may actually serve as a prophetic witness to the dominant powers that so alluringly speak of accommodation and assimilation. A reminder from the first-generation immigrant narrative may prevent that temptation.

The immigrant has the burden of being portrayed as the other. The immigrant is often racialized as the foreigner and the stranger that must appease the dominant culture in order to find acceptance. The immigrant story can be co-opted by the dominant culture to further the mediating narratives of the systems and structures that work to perpetuate the American dream.

While both the Hispanic and Asian American communities are immigrant communities, the two communities have been perceived as having a differing engagement with the American dream. The perceived exclusion of one community from the American dream and the embrace of the other community of the American dream can present as a point of conflict and divergence between the two communities. However, in the narrative of suffering endemic to immigration, common ground can be found. In our mutually experienced racialized identity, solidarity can be found. Additionally, both communities hold family systems and structures in high esteem. The advocacy of the family can be an expression of public witness.

What would it mean, therefore, for both immigrant Christian communities to present a unified public voice? As both communities have been prevented from speaking as a prophetic voice, how could a common unified voice that emerges from the lament of marginalization present a prophetic public witness? As both communities have experienced suffering and the requisite response to suffering is lament, the outcry of lament from these marginalized communities could serve as the necessary prayer for an effective public witness.

WHY SHOULD WE ENGAGE IN PUBLIC WITNESS?

The Scriptures are a living text that informs all aspects of our lives, including public witness. The holistic narrative evident in the Scriptures still speaks to our experience today, even if the social-historical context differs in many ways. In pursuing a biblical, theological vision for public witness, we look toward the book of Exodus as an important scriptural touchpoint and as a text that reveals the character of God. The Exodus story exemplifies God's concrete revelation and the engagement of God with His people. This connects to the idea of public witness against the notion of simply a personalized and privatized faith. Importantly, the Exodus grounds the act of God's self-naming. We cannot know God, therefore, apart from this concrete public expression of God's person in His emotions, commitments, and action to His leader(s); His people; and the broader context. Exodus, therefore, offers an example of a holistic narrative. This narrative has social, political, economic, and religious dimensions, within the people of God and in the broader context.

The book of Exodus also calls us to consider the role of memory in public witness. Exodus reminds us not to forget the foundational history of suffering for the people of God. In ancient Israel this memory was nurtured through the retelling of the Exodus story in the feasts and also as the basis for an ethical life toward the vulnerable. Important questions arise as to how communities nurture memories. What are the mechanisms that have been put in place to achieve this? For example, in the church, we see the establishment of the Lord's Supper to remember that the body of Christ was broken for us and that the blood of Christ was shed for us. That remembrance spurs us to persevere in the life of faith. Can we do public witness without a clear memory of our experience and of God's stepping into that experience?

Why do certain parts of our communities not want to remember suffering? They see suffering as an event in the past that we have moved beyond. Immigrants came into this new land to leave their past behind—maybe they do not want to remember for a reason. Yet, would the loss of memory negatively impact the concept of public witness and the understanding of God? For example, in many Hispanic churches, the stories of the crossing of the border are rarely preached and reflected on biblically/theologically. Though the church will pray for those in deportation proceedings or for protection so that their members can live life without the fear of ICE or the police, the importance of memory is often not taken into account. Past memories do not interact with present reality.

A contributing factor to not wanting to remember may be that the memories are too painful and humiliating. This is the trauma of memory. There is also the possibility of distorted memory, as when the Israelites wanted to go back to Egypt, forgetting what their life had been like. Appropriate memory, therefore, is important for historical perspective, identity, and a better sense of life with God. The challenge then lies, in part, in creating space for memory and mechanisms of memory. We see this in the Old Testament communal feasts and in the familial Sabbath remembrances. Memory is crucial in Deuteronomy 6:4–9 to imparting identity and faith to the next generations. Indeed, memory is a key theme in Deuteronomy. In the absence of memory and if we forget the warnings of the law, it will lead to the abuse of the new outsiders. The collective national amnesia of the negative experiences of earlier generations of immigrants, have now turned against today's immigrants. Some harsh critics of immigrants are former immigrants who now have legal status.

HOW CAN WE ENGAGE IN PUBLIC WITNESS?

The public witness of the Hispanic and Asian North American can take many forms. With the necessity of lament and the reality of the exodus journey at the forefront of the immigrant experience, public witness becomes the out-loud expression of a people who have suffered and experienced much. The power of the immigrant story is that out of suffering and struggle, a strong voice may emerge that presents a prophetic challenge to dysfunctional narratives expressed in the American narrative. Both communities, therefore, should continue to embody a public witness as well as proclaiming the immigrant narrative that demonstrates a public witness.

The stories of the Hispanic and Asian American communities must be heard. We need to know, for instance, that Hispanic American Christians have launched education initiatives in a major urban center to provide higher educational opportunities for a marginalized community. We need to tell of how Hispanic American scholars, activists, pastors, and leaders have advocated for immigration reform in the public sphere, not only benefitting the Latino/a community but the Asian American community (which counts many undocumented individuals in their number) as well as American society as a whole. A predominantly East Asian American local church seeks to engage their neighborhood, searching for partnerships with the Latino community to serve the neighborhood together, and the public witness of the church is shared. A local church in an inner city neighborhood has both second-generation Hispanic Americans and Southeast Asian Americans growing and learning together, presenting a positive public witness as a unified and reconciled community. A Latina campus minister dedicates her time mentoring Asian American students and staff and extends hospitality and welcome from the Latino community to the transplanted Asian Americans. These stories and more tell of how the public witness of the church continues to arise from the Hispanic and Asian North American community. May this witness be received and the voices of this community heard.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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