



Nurturing the Next Generation

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Abstract “Nurturing the Next Generation” explores a set of key issues that both Hispanic and Asian North American churches face in nurturing next generation involvement in the faith community.

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INTRODUCTION

The Hispanic-Asian North American (HANA) Consultation, a gathering of Hispanic and Asian American evangelical theologians and ministry leaders, was held in May 2013 to give special attention to the present state of affairs and the key issues both these immigrant faith communities are facing. Topic-specific tracks were a part of the consultation to engage specific themes common to both groups.¹ One of these tracks, “Nurturing the Next Generation,” focused on exploring how churches and ministries nurture the formation of youth and young adult leaders in both Asian American and Latino contexts.²

KEY ISSUES ADDRESSED AND SIGNIFICANCE

Our time together was spent exploring issues falling under the areas of ethnic identity formation and spiritual formation of the “next generation.” In particular, our hope was to tease out the process in which ministries address the points of intersection of these two topics: how does ethnic identity influence spiritual formation and how does spiritual formation shape ethnic identity?³ Keeping in mind that “ethnic

¹This is a report of what was discussed during the HANA “Nurturing the Generations” track time and is not intended to speak for or to be representative of all Hispanic and Asian Americans as our communities are certainly not monolithic. Gerardo Marti reminds us for the Hispanic context, for example, that “We must be continuously reminded that Hispanics are not a homogenous group; they differ immensely in origin, race, customs, education, religion, and even in language. Instead, it is more important—particularly in the case of Latinos in the United States—to look closely at the context of religion “on the ground” and to pay attention to the concrete dynamics played out in particular congregations.” See Gerardo Marti, “The Diversity-Affirming Latino: Ethnic Options and the Ethnic Transcendent Expression of American Latino Religious Identity” in *Sustaining Faith Traditions: Race, Ethnicity, and Religion among the Latino and Asian American Second Generation*, edited by Carolyn Chen and Russell Jeung (New York: University Press, 2012), 31.

² Track members also included: Young Lee Hertig, Mitch Kim, Danny Martínez, Elizabeth Tamez Méndez, Gideon Tsang, and Tim Tseng.

³ The reciprocal relationship between faith and ethnicity has been noted by ministry practitioners and scholars alike. Sociologists Russell Jeung et al note, “Asian Americans and Latinos, including those involved with faith-based organizations and congregations, have taken these racial categories and rearticulated them as self-determined, empowered racial identities. . . . Religious leaders and institutions have also mobilized around these identities to build their congregations, to relate to other groups, and to engage their sociopolitical environment.” Cf. “Religious, Racial, and Ethnic Identities of the New Second

identity is not an end in itself but a means to getting all the pieces of our lives in order so that we are in a better place to love ourselves, our neighbors and our God,”⁴ these questions are ultimately important for developing mature leaders and building healthy churches and ministries that can contribute to a continually changing society in a meaningful and constructive manner.

Track participants shared about significant experiences and mentors that had shaped their ethnic identity and self-understanding, as well as situations and events that helped catalyze self-awareness of how ethnic identity and faith formation were in constant and dynamic conversation. These experiences and realities were then situated in broader ecclesial contexts (e.g., a “home church”) that further impacted and nurtured their sense of self. This included reflecting on both the affirming and negative ways these spaces had shaped us, leading us to voice our lament, while also sharing positive memories of the many ways in which God worked to use them as beacons of hope and resurrection in our communities. As a result, our conversations dealt with thinking through ethnic and ecclesial inheritances and working out what gifts needed to be reclaimed and what aspects needed to be let go. Our times together ended with discussion on what it means for the next generation to lead “latinamente” or “Asianamente.” These questions of identity, then, involved digging into the relationship between first and second generations within our immigrant ecclesial communities, while also taking into consideration socio-cultural influences and their corresponding struggles.⁵

Three principal themes, then, emerged from these discussions: 1) the intergenerational rift and cultural gap in the relationship between first and second generation immigrant communities; 2) social and ecclesial systems and structures that often exposed or resulted in multiple marginality for next generation Christians; 3) the expressed need for meaningful ways to affirm, encourage, and prepare future leaders.

Experiences of brokenness and alienation reflected in these themes often lead next generation Christians to a deep sense of displacement in first-generation contexts and in the wider American majority culture.⁶ Moreover, whether an architect wrongly labeled as a construction worker, or looking the part but not fitting the culture, each participant expressed the various ways in which stereotypes and totalizing messages imposed false narratives that obscured realities, whether good or bad, and created further distance amongst communities. Every person expressed how even within their own ethnic and ecclesial groups, there was particularity that didn’t fit the mold or stereotype. This “hyphenated” existence, the attempt to straddle two very different worlds, often led to feelings of not fully belonging in either community summed up in a phrase often used in Hispanic American contexts: “No somos ni de aquí, ni de allá” (we don’t have a place here nor there). The starting point of “lamenting” these principal

Generation,” *Sustaining Faith Traditions*, 8. Relatedly and conversely, Milagros Peña and Edwin Hernández point out that “Latinos, those who have newly arrived and those who have lived within the U.S. borders for generations, are reshaping the U.S. cultural, political, economic, and social landscape. As faith engages the lives of individuals, religious institutions through their leaders become a part of this dynamic. Thus religious affiliation continues to provide a means by which ethnic groups articulate their ethnic identities by engaging their social locations.” See “Second-Generation Latin@ Faith Institutions and Identity Formations,” *Sustaining Faith Traditions*, 110.

⁴ Orlando Crespo, *Being Latino in Christ: Finding Wholeness in Your Ethnic Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 145.

⁵ This process unintentionally reflects what Kay Higuera Smith describes as the construction of identity in an ethical manner without “othering.” She suggests “three approaches that can be implemented at the social, institutional and ecclesiological levels: (1) that we interrogate and change how we construct power, including how we objectify others; (2) that we collectively and consciously work to involve ourselves with others at all levels of the social spectrum; and (3) that we explore the social memories of others and seek to uncover the conscious social “forgetting” of others’ stories within our own cultural narratives.” See Kay Higuera Smith, “Embracing the Other: A Vision for Evangelical Identity,” in *Evangelical Postcolonial Conversations: Global Awakenings in Theology and Praxis*, edited by Kay Higuera Smith, Jayachitra Lalitha and L. Daniel Hawk (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 198.

⁶ For further discussion: Gideon Tsang and Soong-Chan Rah, “The Disillusioned Generation: Ecclesiology from the Margins” and Mitchell Kim and David Lee, “Intergenerational Ministry: Why Bother?” in *Honoring the Generations*, edited by M. Sydney Park, Soong-Chan Rah, and Al Tizón (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 2012).

themes before working our way to “hope” is aptly expressed in a poem shared by track participant Gideon Tsang:

The songs of laughter mask the hidden whimpers of sorrow

*Of unfaithful fathers
Overworked mothers
To misunderstood sons and daughters*

*Of companies that rape our land
To outsource the raping of lands
Institutions that raise the powerful
While schools are boarded up and
Overworked educators burn*

*Of overstimulated, overloaded technologies
Rings and vibrations of next appointments
Or news we don't need to hear about or simply to want to hear
While we wander in loneliness*

*The songs of the church cry
To God
For God*

*May the songs of our sorrow
Find God
With our weeping
With our sorrow
God with us*

SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ASIAN AMERICAN AND LATINO FAITH COMMUNITIES

Both groups’ experiences as immigrant faith communities revealed commonalities and shared features, as well as areas of uniqueness. During one of our track times, each group met in “ethnic caucuses” to discuss perceptions of similarity and difference with the other community before a time of sharing together. In both the Hispanic and Asian American ecclesial contexts, there is a feeling of “disconnection” between the generations. For next generation individuals who must not only navigate but also adopt the cultures of “two worlds”—home (immigrant) and majority cultures—there are often linguistic and cultural barriers often present that make communication and connection difficult, such that each generation misses out on hearing the stories of previous generations: about significant experiences, wounds and healings, as well as the struggles and dreams. Participants expressed the need for younger generations to hear the stories of older generations to create spaces of mutual vulnerability, lament, hope, and understanding. The importance of shared narrative, *testimonios*, and storytelling helps both generations arrive towards a better understanding of their history, shared ethnic and spiritual identities, and common values.

Both ecclesial communities have a history of exclusion and marginalization from the majority culture, experiences of pain and struggle in a new context, and a history of looking to their faith community for various forms of support and a place of belonging, and encouragement to persevere despite difficult

circumstances.⁷ For many, these ecclesial spaces have provided diaspora Christians with a spiritual family that is present for times of challenge, joy, and important milestones.⁸

Also common to both Hispanic and Asian American communities was the felt-need by younger generations for the expression of respect and significance from older generations. Shaped by minoritizing experiences in a white-majority culture, younger generations often feel unseen and invalidated, especially needing the affirmation and support of older generations and authority figures. Relatedly, participants explained how this absence of feeling acknowledged or respected often resulted in an individual's limited understanding of their ministerial calling. Whereas the majority culture can often deliver "totalizing messages" of what individuals in our communities *cannot be*, sometimes our own ethnic and/or ecclesial communities deliver "totalizing messages" of what we *should be*. For some, the pursuit of the "American Dream" has resulted in a limited or narrow view of acceptable or desired professions. For others, gender expectations have limited the roles for women in ministry. Both of these examples show the need for freedom, uniqueness of an individual within the broader framework of the need for respect and finding one's place and role in the Kingdom of God.

Finally, the need and desire to contextualize ministry models for the needs of a younger generation was also voiced as a common concern. Younger generations often feel that ministry contexts reflect the culture and values (language, music, programming, etc.) of older generations in a manner that doesn't resonate with them or take their bi-cultural nature into consideration. As a result, participants expressed the desire for more inclusivity in intergenerational spaces, as well as increased openness to various models of ministry that can accommodate for varying needs and cultural expressions within the generations.

While both Hispanic and Asian American participants found many areas of similarity, there were of course differences as well. One significant contrast that emerged was the social acceptability of expressing pain and lament in Latino culture, which is often experienced as a normal part of Sunday worship. Asian American participants on the other hand, observed that this aspect is often more hidden as such expressions are associated with shame. However common these expressions of lament may be in ecclesial contexts for Latinos, it was noted that this practice was not necessarily a common practice in intergenerational dialogue, perhaps in a desire to shield younger generations.

Another difference that rose to the forefront early in our conversation was the realization that the average age of leadership is higher for Asian Americans than it is for Latino/as. Although a shared feature for both communities is a "proving period" of service in ministry before an individual is officially considered a leader, it seems that perhaps due to fewer resources as well as an earlier cultural initiation into adulthood, the "next generation" of leaders is younger in Latino contexts than in Asian American ones.

Although trends for Latinos entering higher education are on the rise, the difference in the average age of leadership is likely also influenced by the varying levels of education, since for most Asian American churches a Master of Divinity degree is a requisite for higher levels of leadership. Additionally, cultural differences in perceptions of time and pressures towards busy-ness was also pointed out. Asian American track participants noted their perception of Latinos as valuing relationships and generously giving others of their time, whereas they felt pressured to fulfill the "American Dream" and to increase productivity as busy-ness was culturally perceived as a higher value and even a virtue. As a result, it seems that Latino leaders are given more freedom to explore or pursue calling once it is understood,

⁷ For an excellent discussion of the history of the Hispanic Protestant church in the United States, see Juan Francisco Martínez, *Los Protestantes: An Introduction to Latino Protestantism in the United States* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011).

⁸ Edward Flores gives an interesting account of how church community gatherings, however informal, can provide what he calls an "infrastructure of community and belonging" for at-risk youth. Cf. "Latinos and Faith Based Recovery from Gangs," in *Sustaining Faith Traditions*, 120.

whereas Asian American participants felt little affirmation and constrained by cultural expectations to succeed instead in secular vocations.

One final difference between the two communities regards the issue of contextualization. Asian American participants observed that given that Spanish as a language is common to almost all Latino communities; it is perhaps easier to talk about a “pan-Latino culture” whereas in Asian American contexts a “mother-tongue” amongst many is not shared. Approaches to contextualization, therefore, may prove to be different as well.

KEY INSIGHTS FOR THE HANA CHURCH AND THE BROADER NORTH AMERICAN CHURCH

This rich time together of relating our histories and experiences of struggle and lament also gave way to sharing our hopes and vision for the next generation and future of our respective immigrant churches. This common space of dialogue spurred our group’s imagination about areas that can be improved in order to better nurture our next generation of Christian leaders:

- ***Reclaim the power of storytelling and shared narratives to strengthen and honor intergenerational relationships***

One of the key themes that emerged in the track discussion was the importance of acknowledging and validating the role that suffering and lament has in the lives of individuals, families, and ecclesial communities. Both communities expressed that experiences of exclusion and marginality led to deepened faith that shaped and strengthened spiritual formation in very meaningful and effective ways for coping with life’s challenges within a majority culture. Similarly, these experiences of dislocation revealed the importance of family relationships that created much needed spaces of cohesion and unity that sustained them in the midst of otherwise isolating or alienating forces. In many cases, it was a church community that fulfilled the role of “extended family,” nurturing relationships and providing care in various ways. On the other hand, as previously discussed, next generation Christians have not felt understood or affirmed in these same spaces. Therefore, the church has simultaneously worked as a cohesive social group that has provided a space to provide safety in the face of social rejection from the majority culture in providing cultural memory to cope in difficult times when carrying the burdensome label of “foreigners” while also perpetuating feelings of alienation in younger generations when they are not affirmed, recognized, or included. Reclaiming the power of storytelling is a tangible means of shared culture creation by both older and younger generations to bridge the intergenerational cultural gap felt by all involved. The resulting shared narratives not only provide a way to lament together but also to celebrate our people—historical, present, and future—giving a broader vista of the beauty of the meta-narrative of God’s providential work throughout the generations to accomplish God’s purposes. Reclaiming the power of storytelling in order to build intergenerational bridges and mutual understanding will require training of mentors and youth workers who can translate and mediate the faith community’s story and legacy. This process should be interactive, including food, rituals, and shared experiences, perhaps in historical locations to inspire learning.

- ***Recognize the blessings and advantages of living as a hyphenated and/or polycentric Christian***

Despite the hardships that come with it, participants also mentioned the benefits of “hyphenated” identities and experiences. Living in the tension between majority and immigrant cultures necessitated that next generation participants learn to think from multiple points of perspective as they navigated both worlds, often playing the roles of cultural translators and bridge-makers while inhabiting the space in-between. The negotiating of multiple identities beyond faith and ethnicity in a dynamic society necessarily leads one towards a polycentric perspective on the world, characterized by openness not only to one’s own group but to other individuals, groups, and the gifts others may bring. An enriched recognition of these blessings and advantages requires making spaces to explore who we are and to work towards

self-understanding. This may include creating new or renewing old rituals and rites of passage suffused in meaning that is relevant and significant for the next generation. Renewing the arts, traditional, innovative, or both, is one such avenue to examine hyphenated identities.

- ***Resist totalizing messages and areas of obstacle to move forward as a healthy next generation***

Despite the struggles and gifts that come with being a part of immigrant ecclesial communities, the challenge of overcoming imposed narratives, at individual and corporate levels alike, arose as a major concern. Resisting totalizing messages (from outside as well as within our ethnic, ecclesial communities) was discussed with respect to two main areas: theological education and gender.

The call for theological training that includes immersion into other cultures as a way to explore identity and to expose students to wider theological conversations that go beyond the major recognized figures was addressed. Relatedly, others added that teaching and learning activities could use historical locations and/or cultural artifacts as a means to teach, model, and encourage the practice of prayer not only in ecclesial but academic contexts as well. The necessity of learning how to be multi-context Christians was emphasized as significant for next generation Christians and beyond that cannot afford to live within their own particularities only in an increasingly globalized world.

Both Asian American and Latino participants saw the call for more attention to be given to issues of gender not only in theological education, but within their respective ecclesial communities as well.⁹ Increased support and affirmation of women in leadership was a strongly voiced concern, as well as providing new images and metaphors (biblical and otherwise) for strong women. The desire to see pastors intentionally advocate, create opportunities, and develop women for service was also expressed.

In light of these insights, several proposals for “areas of celebration” were suggested:

The Celebration of Children

In order to make the most of the gift of intergenerational ecclesial communities, it was pointed out that children should be not only present during worship services, but also thoughtfully included as a part of the Body in order to help build connections from an early stage in a child’s development.

Celebrating the Diversity of Church Typologies

As mentioned before, track conversations were marked both by shared realities and differences as well. One such difference that was acknowledged was the diversity of church experiences participants represented.¹⁰ Differences in denomination, ecclesial polity, and models of ministry were discussed.

⁹ Cf. Peter Cha and Grace May, “Gender Relations in Healthy Households” in *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009) and *More Than Serving Tea: Asian American Women on Expectations, Relationships, Leadership, and Faith* edited by Nikki A. Toyama and Tracy Gee (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006). For a history of evangelical Latina American women in Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal churches in the United States. See Nora O. Lozano, “Fieles en la lucha: Una perspectiva histórica de la mujer evangélica hispana en los estados unidos” in *Iglesias Peregrinas en Busca de Identidad: Cuadros del protestantismo en los Estados Unidos* (Buenos Aires: Kairos, 2004).

¹⁰ Juan Martínez provides a summary of the various models of Latino churches in the United States: churches that function as a “gateway” to the majority culture; those that work as a vehicle from the transmission of Latino values and language; imported churches that are extensions of churches in Latin America; “sister churches” that meet in the same building of a majority culture church, but serve different cultural/ethnic groups; and intentionally multiethnic churches. Moreover, the picture is further expanded when one considers the diversity of language used in any given church (Spanish only, intentionally bilingual, mixed use). Cf. “Aculuración e iglesia evangélica latina en los EEUU” in *Iglesias Peregrinas en Busca de Identidad: Cuadros del protestantismo en los Estados Unidos*, 154-162. Daniel A. Rodriguez affirms the need for English-only models of church within the Hispanic American community for those who do not speak any Spanish. Cf. *A Future for the Latino Church: Models for Multilingual, Multigenerational Hispanic Congregations* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2011).

These realities suggest that the diversity in the various models and “ways of doing” church are not only good, but ought to be celebrated as gifts that contribute to the good of the Body in their own right. These “rich descriptions” of ecclesial experiences lend texture and depth to the picture of immigrant churches in the North American context today. Additionally, these (in)formal network of church communities provide wells of experience and wisdom from which to draw in contextualizing efforts by Asian American and Latino communities as they not only learn from one another, but also join in collaborative efforts to serve together.

Celebrating Life Decisions and Rites of Passage

The lack of intentionality in recognizing, affirming, and celebrating the major life decisions, as well as rites of passage of the next generation was a keenly felt need for Asian American participants. Formalizing traditions that celebrate vocational call for men and women alike was suggested as a means to improve intercultural connection between older and next generations, as well as to provide and broaden early examples of not only acceptable, but honored, paths of service to children. More generally speaking, participants hope to see the creation of a culture of affirmation of both individual and group’s gifts and calling where healthy generation can be built up in their identity in Christ while honoring their ethnic heritage for the service of Christ, the church, and the world.

The shared space and time together of Latino and Asian American track participants was instructive in a number of ways. We were reminded of our call to fellowship with other faith communities different than our own to reflect the unity of the Body of Christ and to build deeper bonds of friendship with one another. We also saw that the vulnerable practice of sharing and confessing our stories with one another can be fruitful ways to engender trust and transparency. The gifts of conversation and family fellowship reflect Orlando Crespo’s thoughts well: “Only in an environment where people are encouraged to pursue a healthy ethnic identity is diversity possible, since diversity is about equally affirming all the cultures and ethnicity that are present. ... Healthy diversity can be used by God to bring affirmation, wholeness and life to all.”¹¹

Asian American and Latino churches have much to share not only with each other, but also with the broader North American church. Both communities have rich histories that beautifully testify to the deep and gracious care of God during times of struggle and joy alike, and have been shaped and marked by these experiences to uniquely reflect the character of Christ in meaningful and influential ways in the contexts in which they have been divinely placed. Highlighted among these gifts is the very shared experience that brings these two groups together--the immigrant experience that is not only a metaphor for the spiritual life but also provides instruction for the way the church ought to live before finding our ultimate rest at home in the New Heavens and New Earth: crossing borders while not only seeking, but also depending on God while yearning for “home”; imitating Christ while taking risks aware for the need to contextualize ministry in new spaces; learning to live in the midst of various tensions while employing the advantages of perspectives gained for the purposes of God’s Kingdom; demonstrating the Spirit’s inclusivity and hospitality while away from “home” and nurturing the creation of a new spiritual family; and helping each other in tangible, concrete, and material ways during times of trouble and need. These are only a few ways in which immigrant churches and the next generation reflect the providential work of the triune God who works, renews, and builds up the church for glory and honor of God and for the inheritance of His people.

¹¹ Crespo, 85.

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