

The Immigrant Church Experience: A Reflection on Personal Experience With Asians in North and South America

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Visit any major city in the world, and it is certain that you will find people from five or six of the world's continents living there. In this respect our world is not much different from the world of the New Testament, a situation ideal for the spreading of the gospel. The primary agents in New Testament evangelism were Greek speaking Jews and God fearing Gentiles, people whom we would describe today as bicultural. Most of the first missionaries were bicultural Jews, and most of the first non Jewish converts were bicultural Gentiles who attended synagogue worship. I am convinced that as in the New Testament, so today as well, the truly bicultural person is still the ideal missionary and that transient and immigrant peoples should be highly valued in evangelistic strategy. There are, however, unique problems that need to be understood, which I want to present in this article.

I have been working for eight years with immigrant Taiwanese churches, first of all in the United States, and most recently in Argentina. I have also worked among the mainland Chinese, Vietnamese, Laotian, and Hmong communities. The following observations should be helpful for those who want to understand the experience of the immigrant church and pray for her with understanding.

Problems immigrant churches face

Certain ordinary problems of ministry become intensified in the immigrant church as follows:

1. Loneliness in leadership. If pastoral leadership is sometimes lonely in the home country, it is doubly so in the adopted country. In the United States, Taiwanese pastors who find a position in the Los Angeles area can support each other, but those who accept a position elsewhere often have no colleagues with whom to associate, and quickly burn out. A pastor who has recently arrived from Asia will often find himself unprepared to minister to the people who have arrived before him. This is because the people are ahead in the process of inculturation, and while the pastor

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can preach the scripture, his applications often, are not culturally relevant. For this reason the people will often reject his leadership, and within a few years the pastor leaves in frustration and grief. The younger generation especially considers him irrelevant, an icon of the past to be venerated only, but not to be trusted with anything important.

Sometimes the opposite problem is also true. A young Vietnamese pastor told me that his older leadership expected him to reproduce the exact kind of church experience the people had known in Asia, which, of course, was impossible for him to do.

2. Insecurity in leadership. In South America, an additional problem of leadership is job insecurity. In a country with only a few immigrant churches from Taiwan, the church a pastor presently serves is the only church he will ever serve in that country. In North America the larger number of Chinese and Taiwanese speaking churches makes this problem less difficult.

3. Lack of liberty in leadership. With institutional ties to a mother church thousands of miles away, pastors often find they are restrained by regulations which do not seem to work in South America, but which they are powerless to change. More than one pastor confessed this frustration as I visited with them.

4. Transiency, a recurrent disappointment. Immigrants are people on the move. Many will move after a short time in the new country after they have learned some of the language and have gotten a job. In Argentina many people leave for North America after only a few years in the country. One pastor accepted the call to serve a church in Argentina, and upon arriving there, discovered that the entire leadership board which had called him had already moved away. He found himself serving a very different kind of church from the one he had expected.

5. Social problems of the immigrant community. When people travel, they often carry with them the problems they thought they had left behind. Often the new environment is more difficult than the old. If there were family tensions back home, they escalate in the new environment, and divorce is often the result. In a small community, one family's problem can have a disproportional effect upon the whole.

The usual generation gap is intensified by the language and cultural differences between parents and children. Children change quickly, and soon begin to identify with the adopted country more than with the country of their parents. Despite the diligent efforts of parents to teach their own language to their children, children prefer to speak the language of their friends from school. I have heard parents tell me that they simply can't talk with their own children about anything really important, because they and their children speak different languages. Under this situation, children may become authorities to their parents. The children understand the language and rules of the new country and must teach their parents. This makes the parents feel helpless and unimportant, because they feel they should be the teachers and not the learners. At times insecure parents act in petty and autocratic ways to maintain their own sense of being parents, which the children resent as unreasonable, especially when they are receiving a democratic education. In a few cases in the United States, children have threatened to call the police to punish their parents

when parents did not listen to the children, an attitude completely contrary to tradition in any Asian country (or western country as well.)

The generation gap also affects life in the church. Not only is the pastor, who may not speak English well, isolated from the younger generation, the deacons and elders are often not trusted by the younger generation. I know one case of serious moral failure which was handled by the youth themselves, while the pastor and elders knew nothing of what had happened, because the young people did not trust the older generation to tell them or to ask their counsel.

The social atmosphere of an immigrant community is unique. Usually as a small minority with its own language and customs, the community develops the close relationships of a traditional village, but often without the trust and security which the traditional village offers. In a traditional village, the authority structures are secure. Everyone knows whom to respect and whom to avoid. Everyone knows who the powerful people are and who should make decisions. In the immigrant community everyone learns everyone's name, just like in a village, but often authority structures are not always immediately clear. Conflicts occur over establishing leadership, and sometimes hard feelings and deep resentments result if Christian charity is absent.

6. Confusion of cultural tradition with Biblical teaching. Just as missionaries have unfortunately imported western tradition as a part of their gospel; so immigrant churches from Asia to the west import their church traditions (sometimes learned from western missionaries) back to the west at a time when the west no longer practices the same things. This can be observed in such things as worship and leadership style. Feeling the pressure of an alien environment, immigrants may gather not so much to worship God; as to renew ties with the old culture. Church may degenerate into nothing more than a club for celebrating one's cultural roots.

I hasten to add that this is not all bad. Many immigrants come to Christian faith because there is a church in their adopted land which values the culture and language of their homeland. But just like the Judaizers who had difficulty separating their own cultural traditions from God's eternal purpose; so the church today must learn to be a Godly institution rather than a mere institution of culture.

Why minister to immigrants?

1. Problems exist as opportunities for grace. So why am I excited about ministry to immigrants? It is precisely because the immigrant community is the best place to plant the seeds of the gospel. Problems should not stop us. Problems exist in order to be overcome. In facing them we discover the power of God's grace. In the book of James we read about class conflict between rich and poor in the Jewish community. The Corinthian Church experienced serious leadership conflict which challenged even the authority of the Apostle Paul himself. False teaching appeared in church after church where spiritually immature leaders began to promote their own ideas, as we see in Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, Galatians, and Colossians. But the church is engaged in warfare, and this kind of disorder is what one should expect in

the middle of a battle. The difficulties in the New Testament Church were overcome, and ours can be overcome too by the Holy Spirit's power.

2. The immigrant church is uniquely equipped to invite immigrants to Christian faith. Immigrants feel a need for fellowship with people like themselves. The church has a unique opportunity to meet this need and provide mentors for the process of inculturation. So long as the church remains clear about its evangelistic mandate as an agent of God's grace for reconciliation, the immigrant church can be the principle means of service and witness to new arrivals.

3. The meaning of the gospel can be clarified in the clash of cultures. It is the bi-cultural person who has the best chance to comprehend the gospel apart from merely local interpretation, and it is the transient peoples who have the best opportunity to carry the message across the cultural barriers of the world. The mono-cultural Jewish Christians stumbled over their own tradition of circumcision. Dietary regulations also were a problem. In this situation it was the bi-cultural Paul from Tarsus who had to correct Peter and the rest of the delegates from Jerusalem at Antioch (Galatians 2: 11-21). In the first century it was the clash of cultures which refined the Jewish understanding of the gospel and preserved it as a truly universal message. Once the Jewish influence was gone, the western church gradually became more a European than a universal institution. As cultures clash today, we again have the opportunity to learn just what is the gospel, and what is mere human tradition.

4. The bicultural community has gifts both for interpretation and propagation of the gospel. Look at the book of Acts! It was Stephen, the Hellenist, who first realized that after Jesus died on the cross for sin, the temple was irrelevant and could be dispensed with (Acts 6-7). It was Philip, another Hellenist, who first preached to non Jews. When Peter visited Cornelius in Acts 10, Philip had already preached to the Samaritans and the Ethiopian eunuch. Both Stephen and Philip were far ahead of the 12 mono-cultural apostles in understanding the heart of the gospel. It was, no doubt, the Hellenists visiting Jerusalem during Pentecost who carried the gospel to Rome long before Paul ever got there, as well as to the rest of the empire. It was probably the proselyte Nicolaus from Antioch (Acts 6:5) who provided the initial contacts with Gentiles in that city where the first Gentile church began. I am convinced that it is bicultural evangelists like Stephen and Philip who will complete the evangelization of the world in our time. It is also this kind of person who can help all of us distinguish between our own religious traditions and the voice of God.

Personal reflection

One of the most exciting adventures of my life was spent during July - November of 1996 in Buenos Aires, working and worshiping with the Chinese and Taiwanese immigrant communities there. I heard young people tell me how they probably never would have believed the gospel back in Asia, but through the hardships of immigration they came into contact with living Christians who gave them a living witness that attracted them to the Lord. Consider the price some of these are paying for their faith. Many of them must help their parents run a business, because the parents

don't speak Spanish. In addition, they attend a university full time and some take on extra jobs to pay tuition. Many are from families of divorce, or whose parents have returned to Taiwan, leaving the youth behind. Most have non-Christian parents who oppose the children's new found faith, yet these youth persist in love and faith and good deeds, determined to follow Jesus. Often they pray for their parents' salvation. In addition to taking responsibility at home, at school, and at church, they still find time to plan and attend spiritual retreats and register for extension classes. I have no doubt, but that God has a significant place for these immigrants in the work of God's kingdom.

I urge the church in Taiwan to pray for the propagation of the gospel through Taiwanese immigrants who are going to other countries, and like the first century Jerusalem Church, to support them as they learn to live the gospel in a new culture with new traditions and customs. Five hundred years from now, most of our inherited human traditions will likely be changed. In fact, with the rapid social change now occurring, one may question what will be the same even five years from now. But the unchanging gospel of God's grace will hold us secure if we hold on to the gospel, and to nothing else, as we enter the 21st century.

