

**From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth:
Asian-Americans in Global Mission**

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Introduction

It is generally accepted now that the epicenter of Christianity has shifted from the North and West to the South and East. And with this shift, mission is no longer a predominantly one-way flow. As the editors of *Mission After Christendom* write, “Though previously mission was unidirectional, moving from the Western hemisphere to what were called mission territories, today mission seems to be from everywhere to everywhere.”¹

A unique manifestation of this “mission from and to everywhere” idea is when an ethnic group migrates *to* North America, establishes church presence there, and then eventually begins to send missionaries throughout the world *from* North America. This paper gives attention to such a case—Asian Christians who have made North America their home and who have begun in earnest to engage in global mission.

If we consider the missionary efforts of China, Korea and the Philippines, a case can be made that Asian Christians take the lead in mission efforts today.² The Asian North American Church (heretofore referred to as “ANA”) has joined in this upswing of missionary participation of Asians from around the world. For example, the increasing number of ANA participants in Inter-Varsity’s triennial Urbana Conference—from a mere handful in 1984 to making up just a little over 30% of all participants in 2009—

¹ Peter Vethanayagamony and Edmund Kee-Fook Chia, “Introduction,” in *Mission after Christendom*, eds. Ogbu Kalu, Peter Vethanayagamony and Edmund Kee-Fook Chia (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 2010), xvii.

² See, for example, the various chapters in Timothy Park, ed. *Asian Mission: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* (Pasadena, CA: Institute for Asian Mission, 2008).

attests to the heightened desire and involvement of ANAs in both local and global outreach.³

But all is not well in the ANA church. Even as mission remains a key component in the ethos of ANA faith communities, insiders know all too well the internal church issues that at first glance appear to be barriers to authentic mission. These issues of which I speak arise primarily from the experience of immigrant churches in North America, which in time find themselves in an intra-cultural, intergenerational struggle. The editors of *Honoring the Generations* describe this struggle succinctly when they write,

Being the church in the world is hard enough. Add to this the complexity of a congregation comprised of people from another culture planted in foreign soil, and the difficulty is heightened. Add yet another level of complexity to this same congregation twenty to thirty years later as first and second/third generations coexist, and the difficulty can reach unmanageable heights.”⁴

This paper is based on research that Pastor John Chung of the historic Park Street Church in Boston and I conducted together on how the generational conflict in the ANA church has impacted, if at all, its missionary efforts. We share our findings in a chapter in the aforementioned volume, *Honoring the Generations*.⁵ In that chapter, we contend that the issues with which ANA churches struggle should not only *not* hinder, but rather *inform* missionary engagement of ANAs in the world.

Too Broken To Do Mission?

To illustrate the contours of the problem, consider the following “true story:”

³ Christy Chappell, email correspondence to authors (18 December 2009). Chappell served as the Communications Director for Urbana 09.

⁴ “Editors Preface,” in *Honoring the Generations: Learning with Asian North American Congregations*, eds. M. Sydney Park, Soong Chan Rah and Al Tizon (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2012), ix.

⁵ John Chung and Al Tizon, “Extending Grace and Reconciliation: From Broken Households to the Ends of the Earth,” in *Honoring the Generations*, eds. Sydney Park, Soong Chan Rah and Al Tizon (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2012), 169-196.

Sandi, a recent seminary graduate, walked out of the elders' meeting of her church confused and frustrated. Having recently been accepted as a candidate by an urban mission organization to serve a nearby Hispanic community, she went into the meeting expecting affirmation, encouragement and perhaps even a commitment to support her prayerfully and financially. What she encountered instead was a wall of questions, which exposed deep rifts within the church regarding the nature of the church's identity and mission.

The elders, of course, did not intend to discourage Sandi, but some of them simply could not see the work she felt called to do as "missionary" since it did not require going anywhere. "Why does the nearby Hispanic neighborhood need missionaries anyway?" they asked in so many words. Sandi saw the irony of the church spending the majority of its annual mission budget on short term mission trips to Mexico and Central America, while questioning the validity of ministering to the very same people in a nearby neighborhood; but being the respectful Asian young person that she was, she chose not to say anything.

Furthermore, in spite of her efforts to describe the holistic approach to mission—a commitment to both evangelism and social action— of the organization that accepted her, the elders peppered her with questions, such as, "What does justice have to do with missions?" and "When are you going to have time to evangelize?" The meeting grew tense as differences in vision got tangled up with personality clashes. She left the meeting thinking how "messed up" her church was and baffled at how the elders, despite claiming to have a strong

passion for missions, seemed oblivious to the nature of the gospel as well as to current trends in mission.

Sandi grew up in this church. Her parents, immigrants from Korea like most of the congregation, had been long time members and lay leaders. Her father even served as an elder at various points. However, for quite some time, Sandi had been feeling more and more alienated from her church, and this last elders' meeting only aggravated those feelings. She asked herself again with new intensity, "Should I keep trying here, or should I just leave and do mission without them?" As frustration got the best of her, she blurted out loud, "How can my church even think about missions when it's so messed up?"

This story reflects a range of experiences that many second and third generation ANA Christians have experienced with reference to mission. Indeed, many of Sandi's generation share her sense of disconnect to the churches in which they grew up.

The question of the church's readiness "to change the world for Christ" in the face of its own conflicts, shortcomings, disagreements, generational misunderstandings, etc.—in a word, its brokenness—is an important one and certainly not limited to ANA churches. How indeed can broken, dysfunctional households called local churches, themselves in desperate need of God's grace and reconciliation, possibly be in a position to bear witness to the good news of Christ in the world?

As understandable as this question is, it comes from emotional impulse rather than clear, biblical thinking. For if nothing else the Bible attests to a God who intentionally chooses and uses broken imperfect people to accomplish God's purposes, as

if broken vessels themselves carry with them the message of God's saving grace (2 Cor. 4:7; Rom. 7).

If this is true, then ANA churches first need to identify, understand and face its own issues; and second, they need to consider these very issues not necessarily as impediments to mission, but ways to understand and practice mission itself. Again, this belief is applicable to all churches, for they are all broken one way or another. But assuming that brokenness manifests itself differently from culture to culture, what are the internal issues that may be particular to ANA churches, and furthermore, how can these in-house issues inform the way they engage the world in mission?

The Issues: Identity and Mission

The internal issues or sources of tension between the generations within the ANA church can fall under two basic categories:

The first category has to do with cultural identity: what does it mean to be an ANA church? When a group identifies as ANA, it implies that it is no longer "purely" Korean or Filipino or Japanese or Indonesian, for example, but is transforming into a hybrid identity that has elements of both homeland and American cultures. Who are we as ANA churches, and how does this "identity-in-progress" impact our relationship with, and mission to, other cultures?

The second category is missiology: what is the ANA church's understanding concerning the nature of the church's mission? And what are their approaches to mission? These missiological questions seem to be answered differently along generational lines, as both first and second generation ANAs seek to be faithful to the gospel.

Identity Issues

Let's first look at some cultural identity issues. There are at least three within the ANA church that inform mission in overtly significant ways.

Immigrant vs. Enculturated. The first is the process of enculturation.

Enculturation—or the shift from a clear identity as a Chinese or Thai or Indian to becoming *Chinese-American*, *Thai-American*, *Indian-American*—is inevitable. This process of internalizing some of the lifeways of one's new home culture while also retaining some of the lifeways of their original culture is happening one way or another. Moreover, there are experiences that the various specific ethnicities share with one another that have warranted the pan-ethnic “Asian North American” designation, as these shared experiences between specific Asian cultures create a kind of shared hybrid culture. Indeed the complex enculturation/hybridization of Asian cultures in North America is a dynamic, ongoing process. To be an ANA, therefore, represents an identity-in-progress, or in the words of the late David Ng, the ANA church is a “people on the way.”⁶

Immigrant churches almost always begin with the vision to serve their own as they navigate a strange new land. Korean churches, for example, begin with the vision of serving Korean Christians who have moved to the United States, as well as to reach non-Christian Koreans with the gospel. The key word here is *Korean*. In the initial years, the church's reason-for-being has been its mission to its own specific people group. With the passage of time, however, the church moves along the immigrant-enculturated continuum and expands its vision to include non-Koreans. As this happens, those primarily among the older members begin to feel the slippage of cultural identity and therefore tend to

⁶ David Ng, ed. *People on the Way: Asian North Americans Discovering Christ, Culture, and Community* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1996), xvii-xix.

resist enculturation. In contrast, the younger generation, enculturated through various venues of school, friends, and media, finds the older generation's posture of retaining the old and resisting the new difficult to understand.

Ethnocentric vs. Assimilated. A second issue takes enculturation issue one level deeper. Naturally and understandably, first-generation ANAs tend to seek the preservation of the values and lifeways of their origins; while also naturally and understandably, many of their children and grandchildren tend to embrace the North American culture in which they grew up. While many among first generation interpret this second/third generation embrace of American culture as unnecessarily assimilationist and disrespectful, some of the young interpret the tenacious grip of the first generation to the lifeways of the original culture as ethnocentric, sometimes even racist, as their parents and grandparents work hard to retain the cultural "purity" of the church.

Homogenous vs. Multicultural. And a third interlocking issue of identity has to do with differing views of multiculturalism. Is being culturally homogenous valid in the context of a multicultural society? ANA churches have approached this issue differently: Some work hard to retain elements of their Asian culture; which often results in a predominantly homogenous fellowship. Others work hard to diversify, while maintaining a primary focus upon their ethnic population. Others develop two services—one culturally specific conducted in the mother tongue and the other multicultural conducted in English. Still others set out to be intentionally multicultural.

One of the characteristics of a healthy ANA church, according to Helen Lee, is that it "embraces the possibility of diversity" (Acts 15:8-11; Eph. 2:11-22; 1 Cor. 12:13).⁷

⁷ Helen Lee, "Hospitable Households," in *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*, eds. Peter Cha, Steve Kang and Helen Lee (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 141-142.

From this perspective, it would be erroneous to view the famous Homogenous Unit Principle (or infamous, depending on one's perspective) as the end of the story. The key component of church growth theory in the 1970s and 80s, HUP refers to the idea that evangelism among peoples of the same culture is more effective. In the words of HUP's innovator Donald McGavran, people "like to become Christians without crossing racial, linguistic or class barriers."⁸ HUP, however, does not have to result in permanently homogeneous churches. The Pasadena Statement, a document signed by both champions and critics of HUP, still provides the definitive word. It states: "All of us are agreed that in many situations a homogenous unit church can be a legitimate and authentic church. Yet we are also all agreed that it can never be complete in itself."⁹ Indeed, as ANAs, and all peoples in Christ, grow in the gospel, their view of God's kingdom becomes increasingly multi-colored and multi-cultured.

Missiological Issues

These cultural identity issues—immigrant vs. enculturated, ethnocentric vs. assimilationist, and homogenous vs. multicultural—could adversely affect the missional practice of ANA churches, but they do not have to. Before suggesting a way forward, however, we need to consider a second category of issues—namely, the differing ways in which the generations in ANA churches understand and practice mission.

Over there or right here? First of all, *where* does the church do mission? While the first generation tends to answer this question in terms of sending people "over there" to share the gospel with those who have not yet heard, second/third generations tend to

⁸ Donald McGavran, cited in "The Pasadena Statement," in *Making Christ Known*, ed. John Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 62.

⁹ Lausanne Committee for World Evangelism, "The Pasadena Statement," in *Making Christ Known*, ed. John Stott (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 64.

answer it in terms of the local church doing mission “right where it is,” sharing the gospel with the church’s lost and needy neighbors. For the first generation, the church participates in the Great Commission, but without changing the nature of the home church. For the second and third generations, mission is not so much as a “sending” body but as a serving body to any and all in the local community and beyond; and as non-Asian converts join the church, the church becomes multicultural.

Word or Deed? Secondly, what activities constitute mission? How the ANA church has negotiated word (evangelism) and deed (compassion and justice) in its understanding and practice of mission has also defined one of the points of contention. While the first generation tends to view evangelism as the primary (if not the sole) task of mission, the second and third generations tend to embrace a broader vision of mission that entails both evangelism and compassion and justice, although growing evidence shows that compassion and justice are much more affirmed among the younger generations than evangelism.

What it does and where it’s done are the missiological issues with which ANA churches have struggled. These categories of cultural identity and missiology get at the various tension points regarding mission that more or less run along generational lines in ANA churches.

The Hope and Strategy: A Proposal

I want to propose a “both/and” approach as a way to negotiate the tensions between first and second/third generations in ANA churches. Several “both/and” practices emerge that I believe can serve as both the hope and the strategy for healthy ANA churches engaged in mission.

Humility in Mission

The first is not so much a “both/and” but the *basis* of a “both/and” approach—namely, humility in mission. The truth that we are saved and sanctified by grace requires a foundation of humility to undergird all of our missional activity, and it begins with extending grace toward one another across the generational and cultural divides. The humility needed to learn from one another in the cultural and generational amalgam of the ANA church is the very humility that should wrap all of our missionary endeavors in the world. Contrary to colonial models of mission—which smacked of ethnocentrism, insensitivity, manipulation, and violence—the ANA church can do mission another way, namely, by exercising humility, understanding and love among the people they serve with the gospel; virtues that are being forged by the very tensions experienced between the generations in ANA churches. In short, as ANAs learn to love, understand and collaborate with each other across the generational divide, it adopts a loving, understanding and collaborative approach with those whom they feel called to serve in mission in the world.

Building upon this humility in mission, four “both/ands” come to the fore:

Intergenerational Outreach

The list begins with intergenerational outreach. Does the ANA church have to choose between ministering to the first and the second/third generations? NO! In terms of mission, this means at the very least that both new immigrants and the second and third generations caught between cultures need to be on the radar screen of ANA church mission. It is not an either/or proposition; ANA churches cannot forget to reach out to the immigrants who continue to come from the homeland as well as to reach out to the

younger ANA generations. This implies a deep appreciation and respect for the lifeways of the homeland even as the church learns how to negotiate the North American cultural terrain. The work needed for the first and second/third generations to understand one another reminds us that we must address the needs of both immigrant and enculturated populations within our own people group.

Multicultural Outreach

A second “both/and” is multicultural outreach. Does the ANA church have to choose between ministering to people of the same ethnic group and people of other ethnic groups? NO! If intergenerational outreach calls ANA churches to serve their own in every generation, then multicultural outreach calls them to grasp the culturally universal scope of the gospel. A very common struggle in many ANA churches falls along the lines of, “Should the church remain intentionally ANA, or does every church need to strive to be multicultural in order to be faithful to the gospel?” The answer is yes and yes.

Missionally speaking, this means a commitment to preaching the gospel to *all* peoples, but beginning with our own. The tension between homogeneity and multiculturalism in the ANA church points to an approach to mission that at once celebrates our cultural identity and strives to reflect the diversity of the gospel.

Local and Global Outreach

A third “both/and” is to affirm local and global outreach. Does the ANA church have to choose between doing local mission or global mission? NO! In fact, Jesus did not command in Acts 1:8 that we are to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem OR Judea and Samaria OR the ends of the earth. He said “and.” Indeed the church’s outreach must be local, global, and everywhere in between.

The “local versus global” debate with regard to the church’s mission is ultimately a misguided one.³⁸ Mission does not refer primarily to *where*, but to *what* the church is doing for the sake of the gospel. What if churches came to regard gospel work as genuine mission whether it occurs thousands of miles away across the ocean or just a few blocks away across the street? The tension between local and global mission in the ANA church points to an approach to mission that sees the need to serve people in North America and beyond in the service of the gospel.

Holistic Outreach

A final “both/and” point of strategy is holistic outreach. Does the church have to choose between word and deed, evangelism and social responsibility? NO! In fact, it *must* not. Few churches escaped the battle that raged for the soul of mission during the greater part of the twentieth century. The question was, “Is the essence of mission soul-winning (evangelism), or is it the betterment of society and justice?”

The wholeness of the gospel, of course, challenges this either/or thinking, for the gospel has both personal and social dimensions. Authentic biblical mission cannot pit word against deed or vice versa. From a kingdom perspective, “evangelization without liberation, a change of heart without a change of structures, vertical reconciliation (between God and people) without horizontal reconciliation (between people and people), and church planting without community building” reflect missional shortsightedness.¹⁰ The tension in the ANA church between evangelism and social concern points to the need to proclaim the gospel by both word and deed as the way to do mission in the world.

Wrapped in humility, forged out of its own internal struggles, the ANA church-in-mission will engage in: 1) intergenerational outreach, serving both first and second/third

¹⁰ Al Tizon, *Transformation after Lausanne* (Oxford, UK et al.: Regnum, 2008), 6.

generations; 2) multi-cultural outreach, serving both its own people as well as other peoples; 3) local and global outreach, bearing witness to the gospel in the community as well as to the ends of the earth; and 4) holistic outreach, telling the story of Christ as well as demonstrating its compassion and justice in the world.

Conclusion

In conclusion, to allow our brokenness—in our case, the conflicts and tensions brought on by differences in the generations—impede our participation in God’s mission would be a travesty. I have in fact argued in this paper that the very issues with which ANA churches struggle are not only *not* impediments, but are windows through which we can peer to understand how we should go about doing mission in the world.

Imagine a continuation of the story of Sandi and the elders in light of this understanding of God’s mission. What Sandi wanted to hear from the elders was, “Sandi, we are so excited that you want to be a missionary. Go for it! How can we help?” But despite not getting that kind of response, she fights off the temptation to leave the church. Asking God for humility and patience, she is determined to pursue the mission to which she feels called—to serve the needy in a nearby Hispanic neighborhood with the whole gospel—while continuing to work humbly and respectfully with the elders of her church.

The elders also reflected upon the meeting with Sandi and felt badly about how things ended. After a special meeting of the elders, one of them called Sandi in order to invite her to the next official meeting to discuss further her mission plans. On behalf of all the elders, he affirmed her and said that they really want to know more about her understanding of mission, and in turn, the elders would also like to tell her their understanding of mission. “I would like that very much,” Sandi replied.

Whether they will ever come to full agreement on questions concerning mission, the elder told Sandi that they all feel a sense of pride that one of their young is choosing a life of mission. With that, they desire to support Sandi as much as possible. They are not naïve to think, however, that issues, questions, and conflicts concerning the mission of the church will not arise between the older and younger generations; they know that the church is still a work in progress—at times, even a mess. But in light of the gospel, they also know that they must nonetheless live out the call to participate in God’s mission, and they must strive to do it together.