

THE Unfolding Face of the Covenant



GREG YEE looks at why so many young Asian American church leaders have found a home in the Covenant.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects 213 percent growth into 2050 for the Asian American community. It is the fastest growing group in the United States. Similarly in Canada, nearly 60 percent of all new immigrants are Asian and are rapidly adding to Canada's increasing diversity.

Within the Covenant we have seen corresponding growth as we now have almost thirty vibrant and unique churches that are led by Asian Ameri-

development. In an honest moment, others may explain it as mere political correctness. But the fact is that the Covenant has become a magnet for Asian American leaders as the denomination has become a familiar name within Asian American ministry circles. Why? What is the draw? And more pointedly, how does this speak to where we are as a denomination?

Immigration Laws

Asian Americans were the first people group that was barred from immigrating to the United States. Laws were

the sixties and seventies, and Elmer Pearson, pastor of Community Covenant Church in Rocklin, California, and then First Covenant Church in San Francisco during that time, helped start our first Korean-speaking churches in San Francisco and Marina, California, in the heat of the civil rights movement. (Our first Spanish-speaking and African American churches also trace their beginnings back to this period.) We added several Korean-speaking churches over the next three decades, but a whole new wave was on the horizon.

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can pastors or are predominantly Asian American in their makeup. This is in addition to the immigrant ministries of seventeen Korean, one Chinese, and four Southeast Asian churches.

These churches vary in size from small to very large. They are monocultural, multicultural, and multiethnic. They are mostly concentrated on the East and West Coasts and in Illinois and Texas, but their influence is reaching throughout the entire denomination.

Asian American Covenanters are teaching at North Park and other prominent colleges and seminaries. They are serving as a denominational director, an associate superintendent, and other conference staff members. They are contributing in many other ways on committees, boards, and commissions.

Some may call this growth the natural evolution of our sociological

passed by the government to exclude them, intending to reduce their numbers as they made their way to the United States to build railroads, build the levee systems in northern California, and work the goldmines and other booming industries.

The exclusion laws of the United States, and similar ones in Canada, worked effectively and added to the sentiment that Asians could not be assimilated and had no permanent place here. An overt and covert ethos developed that Asians were "perpetual aliens," and not part of mainstream America.

As the Asian population dramatically grew with the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which ended immigration restrictions based on nation of origin, American connection to this population also developed. Missionally minded Covenanters like Ed Larson, superintendent of the Pacific Southwest Conference in

Addressing the Silent Exodus

In the 1990s Asian American leaders were reporting the church rates among first-generation Korean Americans to be approximately 75 percent. But when it came to the second generation, reports showed the numbers plummeting to 5 percent. This was similarly experienced in other Asian communities and was commonly referred to as the silent exodus of the second generation.

As they graduated from meaningful discipleship experiences through college parachurch ministries, many young Asian Americans entered their post-college world feeling conflicted. They did not feel comfortable back in their immigrant church setting, and they did not feel like they fit in a non-Asian church. They found themselves stuck between two worlds,

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not fully identified with their cultural background (Korean, Chinese, etc.) and not fully “American.” They had no place to meaningfully call home. Much as Asian Americans had struggled to fit into America for more than 100 years, the second generation often struggled to fit in spiritually.

As a result of this common experience there was a marked increase in the number of second-generation church plants that started in the 1990s. One such church was Parkwood Community in the western suburbs of Chicago. The church began core group development in 1995 in response to these needs within the

enactment leaders exhibited an intentionality that would eventually help pave the way for Parkwood to be adopted as the Covenant’s first second-generation Asian American church at the 1997 Annual Meeting in Anaheim, California.

What needs to be remembered is that denominational leaders took a chance on a group of very inexperienced church planters who had no previous connection with the Covenant and were culturally different. It is true that nothing of value is obtained easily or without risk, but this was clearly risky and required some out-of-the-box thinking. It could

just one view when you could uphold both!

For all the Asian American leaders and churches that would follow, the sense of fit with the Covenant was a match ready to bloom. Many Asian American pastors desperately sought to find a place that affirmed their giftedness without the complexities of cultural hierarchical protocols. They sought a place of exploration and grace rather than oppressive legalism. They sought a covering and accountability that stood in contrast to the painful church splits they saw time and time again. They desired to find a place where the fullness of the gospel work was preached and lived out. They sought mentors and older saints to help guide their journey. The ethos and real time commitments of the Covenant became attractive fertile ground.

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Asian American community. Parkwood scraped together methods and strategies from books, tapes, and wise colleagues. An Evangelical Presbyterian Church helped begin Parkwood and had high hopes that Parkwood would join the EPC after its extensive denominational search process.

Parkwood’s pastoral team leader Peter Cha sought the counsel of his former homiletics professor at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, David Larsen, brother of then Covenant president Paul Larsen. This time of discernment ultimately led a group of Parkwood’s pastors and lay leaders to a Midwinter Conference and conversations with Central Conference leaders Herb Freedholm and Craig Anderson, executive director of the ministry Don Njaa, and director of church planting Gary Walter.

Parkwood experienced a growing sense of chemistry and convergence with the Covenant, especially as the denomination pushed into the third year of its church planting focus. Cov-

have easily exploded in their collective faces.

A Good Fit

Up to that point, most “Asian American” churches consisted of only one Asian cultural group, but Parkwood intentionally started as a pan-Asian ministry. Among the different layers of diversity that were gathered were several denominational and church backgrounds. As Parkwood looked at the Evangelical Presbyterian Church, they had to consider whether this would be a good home for the many Chinese Americans who had a more baptistic experience. As Parkwood looked at the American Baptist Church, they had to ask whether folks like the Korean Americans who had mostly grown up in Presbyterian churches would be asked to be re-baptized.

The Covenant’s commitment to freedom in Christ and a high theology of our life together—to not break fellowship over non-cardinal doctrine—was the perfect answer. Why choose

Momentum

Parkwood’s core team consisted of key leaders who were already highly regarded within the Chinese, Japanese, and Korean churches in the Chicago area. Many had served or were currently serving in key leadership positions in InterVarsity and Asian American Christian Fellowship. Their members came from the East and West Coasts and had strong connections there.

What the Covenant tapped into was a whole new network of people and ministries that it would have never connected with by itself. When we talk about how small our world often is, we Americans often talk about six degrees of separation. But Asian Americans often think that there is no more than three degrees of separation for them. So within this tight community, word began to spread.

One of Peter Cha’s best friends and a close ministry colleague was Dave Gibbons, who was a couple years into starting Newsong in Irvine, California, when Parkwood began. Cha and Parkwood’s leap into the Covenant quickly

helped convince Gibbons to also make the leap with Newsong. Momentum began to build.

A year after Cha and his core group started the vision of Parkwood, I had just graduated from seminary in Chicago. I was making plans to head back to California to minister in a Chinese church, which included exploring the possibility of serving under Steve Wong, a long-time friend from my home church in Oakland whose father had been the pastor when I was young. But I made the decision to sign on to help plant Parkwood and joined Cha as his co-pastor.

At the 1997 Covenant Annual Meeting where Parkwood was voted and received into the denomination, I met Jim Gaderlund, pastor of Foot-hill Covenant Church in Los Altos, California, and we realized we both knew Steve. Jim and I joined together to convince him to join the Covenant.

The result was our very first home-grown Asian American church plant: Grace Community Covenant Church in Los Altos opened its doors in 1998.

As God raised Peter Cha and Dave Gibbons more and more, they began to emerge as leaders within the second-generation Asian American community. Word spread. As Parkwood, Newsong, and Grace came on board, soon to follow were Quest in Seattle (Eugene Cho), Cambridge Community Fellowship in Boston (Soong-Chan Rah), Great Exchange in Sunnyvale, California (Dave Chae), Highrock in Arlington, Massachusetts (Peter Sung and David Swaim), and New Community in Chicago (Peter Hong).

Relationships were a large part of many joining. But it was the Covenant's ethos and earnest commitment to growing deeper in Christ and further in mission that ultimately convinced inquirers. Putting these things

together, Asian Americans saw an opportunity to be part of a movement and a family. Key leaders were getting the word out that something special was happening in the Covenant.

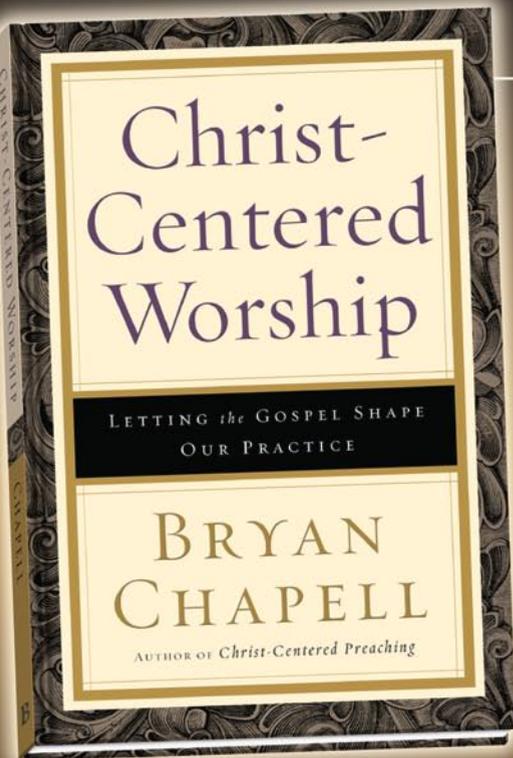
Leader Profile

The Covenant is attracting a somewhat narrow slice of Asian American leaders. The vast majority of these leaders are not specifically targeting Asian Americans. Their passion is to build congregations that genuinely reflect the ethnic and social economic diversity of their communities.

The Covenant is attracting leaders who are socially active, yet relatively conservative theologically. With the Covenant's wide investment in racial righteousness and ministries of compassion, mercy, and justice, it makes sense that we are tapping into these types of Asian American leaders.

The Covenant is attracting lead-

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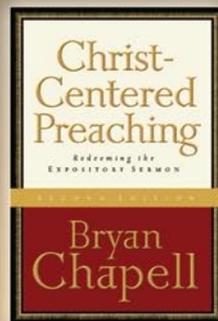
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ers who want to see healthier communities of faith that are redemptive. Though coming from traditionally patriarchal cultures, these leaders are committed to breaking down the walls of gender. In centuries past, some Asian cultures did not find it necessary for women to even have individual names. Women found their designation as it related to male figures in their family. Undoing these types of underlying world-views that still have an impact on families and churches will take deliberate and earnest work.

The Covenant also tends to be attracting mostly Chinese, Japanese, or Korean Americans. Though these East Asians are the historically larger Asian American groups, it is important to note that we have now entered a new chapter in the

United States where the aggregate number of South and Southeast Asians now outnumbers East Asians. This is a significant shift. It has opened the need for us to understand the great diversity even within this singular ethnic category.

The 2000 census identified eighteen culturally distinct Asian sub-groups and twelve culturally distinct Pacific Islanders sub-groups. Though many of these groups may look similar, there are vast differences. Our challenge in the church is to continue to find new networks of Asian leaders.

Honoring Ethnicity

The Asian American boom came during a time when the Covenant was bringing more attention to its growing ethnic diversity. The church celebrated it and established whole conferences around it, developed ministries unpacking race realities, continued difficult dialogue, and introduced new

strategies.

The ongoing mandate for ethnic inclusion on all denominational boards and the unfolding of a five-fold test for ethnic diversity continued to communicate very clearly that the place for Asian Americans in the Covenant was not token or departmentalized. It was not an assimilation scheme for Asians to lengthen their family names by tacking on a “holm”

or a “quist” to the end.

God is converging the original Covenant story coming out of Sweden and many new stories coming from very different places to create something new. Asian Americans have been drawn to the Covenant because they are being asked to help define where God has brought us and to help shape where we

are going. They feel the freedom to be themselves in all the beauty and complications of their culture and in being bicultural. They feel invited into the heart of the movement and not just standing as ornamentation for padding statistics. As Dave Gibbons says, we are learning to “honor the past, yet fuel the fringe.”

In other ways of honoring the past, Asian Americans are learning the importance of what has gone before them in the race struggle. There is a wonderful growing solidarity with African Americans and Hispanics in the overall movement. What is happening is a deeper reflection on the rights and privileges now enjoyed by Asian Americans because of the blood, sweat, and tears of African Americans and others who fought for civil rights. Things did not just suddenly evolve. They developed over a long period of time, through countless meetings and through earnestly seeking God’s

word together. To pretend that race is not an issue anymore is an affront to what has gone before us. We need to honor it, identify current realities, and push ahead together.

In this, Asian Americans have discovered that the Covenant intends to honor everybody’s past, not just those who are more prominent or in greatest number. As Pacific Southwest Conference director of outreach and Hispanic church planting Walter Contreras quips, “You must either be bilingual or bicultural, or you will be by yourself!” It is a sentiment widely felt and experienced. We are in it together and will fight the tendency to stay by ourselves.

The Trajectory of the Gospel

As we look at the growth of Asian American leaders and churches within the Covenant, we dare not offer simplistic demographic or sociological explanations of what is happening. Rather, what we are seeing is the unfolding of the powerful work of the gospel that we have always been about in the Covenant. This is not some spiritual platitude, but a spiritual reality of who we are. “We are pushed by the gospel and pulled by the Spirit,” as Dave Olson, executive minister of church growth and evangelism, declares.

The trajectory of the gospel has launched us from familiar to unfamiliar, from comfortable to threatening, and from entitlement to radical release. Our Asian American story is just part of so many stories that make up the beautiful mosaic God has created in us. He has done immeasurably more than we ever imagined in 1885 or 1960 or 1993. It has been God’s power that has been at work in us. With one voice and one heart we give him praise and honor as we see new generations of people from every background and culture bring new perspectives, gifts, and passions so we can be stronger together than we ever could be apart (Philippians 3:20-21). ■

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