Shifting Boundaries within Second-Generation Korean American Churches*

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This study, based on 108 interviews and participant observation at 22 churches, examines the tension among newly formed second-generation Korean American churches in Los Angeles over its ethnic boundaries. Although all of the newly formed churches are open to non-Koreans, not all envision or desire a multiracial church. First, some pastors want their churches to remain predominately Korean American because they believe that the church is the main institution responsible for preserving the Korean culture and passing it down to subsequent generations. Others want to stretch their boundaries to include all Asian Americans. They argue that the similarities in life experiences and cultural orientation, largely derived by their shared status as children of immigrants and as racial minorities in the United States, among different Asian American groups serve as the common denominator. Finally, several pastors are determined to transform their churches into multiracial congregations. Documenting the current stage of experimentation and transition, this study of second-generation churches provides important insights on the role of religion and religious organizations in immigrant adaptation and identity formation.

Key words: Korean American christianity; ethnicity; multiracial churches; Asian American churches; immigrant adaptation; second generation

INTRODUCTION

Second-generation Korean Americans, with an unparalleled entrepreneurial fervor, are developing new churches that aim to shape the future of American Christianity. The development of second-generation Korean American churches is a recent and rapidly growing phenomenon in major cities throughout the United States. In Los Angeles, over 56 new churches have been established since 1992 and these churches are flourishing—the largest boasts an active membership of 3000. The proliferation of new churches established by the children of Korean immigrants is historically unprecedented.

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No other immigrant group has witnessed its second generation reinventing and replanting ethnic churches at quite the same level as Korean Americans.

In multicultural Los Angeles at the beginning of the twenty-first century, second-generation Korean Americans do not face a stark choice between assimilation and cultural pluralism. They are not joining mainstream churches or remaining within the churches of their immigrant parents. Rather, they are charting out an entirely new path altogether. They are leaving the immigrant church to create and inhabit innovative, self-constructed spiritual homes. Contemporary scholars of religion have suggested that the second generation, in their quest to differentiate and distance themselves from their parent’s religion, have rushed into the arms of mainstream Evangelicalism. In her study of second-generation Indian Christians, Prema Kurien (2004) found that the younger Indians continually compared their parent’s ethnic church unfavorably with the mainstream American churches that they had attended. Other scholars have pointed to the manner in which second-generation Korean American college students, when afforded with independence from their parents, are constructing campus groups that reproduces the values and practices of mainstream Evangelicalism (Kim 2006; Park 2004). These studies depict second-generation churches and ministries as replicas of white Evangelical institutions, albeit with a nonwhite membership. In contrast, the churches in my study are much more cautious and deliberate in choosing which elements of mainstream Evangelicalism they want to embrace. Their goal isn’t simply to disassociate with the religion of their immigrant parents and realign themselves with mainstream Evangelicalism. The majority of the churches do not want to be carbon copies of successful white Evangelical churches. Rather, they want to carve out a hybrid third space that is uniquely their own, distinct from mainstream Evangelicalism and from Korean Christianity.

For second-generation Korean American Protestants in this study, the hybrid third space is where they make their home. However, in its current period of development, the hybrid third space exists in a state of tension. This study examines the internal tension that exists in and among the different second-generation churches. This internal tension revolves around the reality that at the current stage of development, second-generation churches are confronted with shared dilemmas over the cultural substance within its boundaries. None of the second-generation pastors want their churches to be exact replicas of mainstream Evangelical churches. Rather, they hope to fashion and practice Christianity that is shaped by multiple frames of reference, including their ethnic culture. Nonetheless, there are creative tensions and differences among the churches over how much and in what ways ethnic culture will express itself

1Among the twenty churches in this study, five belong to mainline denominations. However, all of the churches, regardless of their denominational affiliation embrace the following Evangelical tenets: (1) biblical inerrancy; (2) a born again experience; and (3) the commitment to converting others.
in their ministries. Although all of the churches are open to non-Koreans, not all envision or desire a fully multiracial church. Some want their churches to remain predominately Korean American, others want to stretch their ethnic boundaries to include other Asian Americans, while others want their churches to evolve into multiracial institutions.

Currently, second-generation Korean American churches in Los Angeles espouse three different visions with respect to their ethnic boundaries. Some desire to reach out primarily to other Korean Americans, others want to enlarge their target population to include non-Korean Asian Americans, and still others are determined for their churches to become fully multiracial. Because these new experiments and paradigms in second-generation ministry emerged within the recent past, this article focuses on the beginning stages of resolution and response. In this article, I examine and analyze each of the three visions and focus on the following questions: in what ways are the ethnic boundaries at these churches being defined, stretched, and contested; how important is ethnic identity and culture within these churches; what are the inherent limitations and contradictions within each paradigm; and finally, what are their potential possibilities and hopes?

ETHNIC CHURCH AND CULTURAL PRESERVATION

Numerous studies of white immigrant groups examined the important role of the ethnic church in cultural preservation and transmission (Handlin 1951; Herberg 1955; Yancey et al. 1978). In his seminal work on ethnicity and religion, Will Herberg (1955) asserted that white immigrant groups had effectively used religion as an ethnic marker because the country embraced religious pluralism. However, the immigrant groups’ relationship to ethnic churches varied greatly by generation. For the immigrant generation, religious ties were generally less important than ethnic ties. The second generation left the ethnic church because for them, assimilation into mainstream society was of utmost importance. The third generation, however, did not need to prove that they were American. They could practice and embrace their cultural beliefs and practices without the threat of being labeled “un-American.” Recently, there have been several important studies on the role of the Korean church in cultural preservation (Chai 1998; Kim 2006; Min and Kim 2005). These studies largely find that second-generation Korean Americans embrace and practice religion that is modeled after mainstream evangelicalism, not the religion of their immigrant parents. Kelly Chong, however, argues that the church plays a significant role for second-generation Korean Americans in instilling and reinforcing ethnic identity. The ethnic church serves “as an institutional vehicle for the cultural reproduction and socialization of the second generation into Korean culture (1998:262).”

My research suggests that second-generation Korean Christians in Los Angeles are not rejecting the faith of their parents in exchange for mainstream
evangelicalism. Rather, those in my study who have left immigrant churches to develop independent churches are striving to fashion a distinct spirituality by appropriating elements from various sources, including the religion of their parents. Previous studies on the second generation focused primarily on English ministries within immigrant churches where generational tensions and debates are played out within the same church (Chai 1998; Chong 1998). The churches in my study are not affiliated with immigrant congregations and the independence coupled with distance provides a level of perspective and appreciation for their immigrant parents’ faith. In addition, my study focuses on religious developments in Los Angeles, where the largest number of Koreans in the United States resides. The “critical mass” of Koreans in Los Angeles coupled with the city’s racial diversity, affords second-generation Korean Americans freedom and the fertile soil to innovate and experiment.

Immigration historians have depicted the second generation as a transitional generation—on the steady march toward the inevitable decline of ethnic identity and allegiance. My research suggests an alternative possibility. By harnessing religion and innovatively inhabiting hybrid third spaces, second-generation Korean Americans can be viewed as creative agents defining and shaping their own ethnic and religious futures.

EMERGENT IDENTITIES

Several studies find that ethnic groups can create a new “emergent” culture of their own in their respective ethnic communities and institutions (Conzen and Gerber 1992; Kim 2006; Yancey et al. 1976). Conzen et al. (1992) argue that throughout U.S. history, ethnic groups and the American society at large have continually engaged in a process of “ethnic invention.” The process of inventing ethnicity affects not only the ethnic group itself but also transforms and reformulates the very definition of “American.” Every immigrant group in U.S. history experienced a period of generational transition when the second generation came of age and challenged their parents for leadership over their community’s ethnic institutions (Conzen et al. 1992). The greatest levels of innovation and experimentation in ethnic invention took place during these transitional periods. Deborah Moore (2006) found that second-generation Jews in New York during the interwar period developed indigenous American Jewish religious practices that survived for subsequent generations. Similarly, Rebecca Kim (2006), in her study of second-generation Korean American evangelicals on college campuses, focuses on the development of an emergent culture that is “made in the USA,” which is neither mainstream nor immigrant ethnic-based. My research builds upon the studies of “emergent” culture and religion.

Second-generation Korean Americans, in my study, do not attend mainstream churches or immigrant ethnic churches. Rather, they are charting
a new path. Within their independent churches they are inventing a new expression of spirituality with discernable fingerprints of their ethnic and generational selves. However, they do not want to remain in their ethnic religious enclaves, shut off from the larger society. Rather, their goal to evangelize and welcome all people in their churches without having to compromise their identities. They aim to do this by developing and reflexively practicing religion that is flavored by their ethnic culture. In so doing, I argue that these churches by forming and inhabiting third spaces are challenging and blurring the boundaries that distinguish “ethnic” from “mainstream” religion. They are demonstrating that in today’s society particularly in racially and ethnically diverse cities such as Los Angeles, there are hybrid third spaces to inhabit.

RELIGIOUS UNIVERSALISM VERSUS ETHNIC PARTICULARISM

Almost all major religions adhere to some form of universalism. The Christian faith instructs believers to “take the gospel” to all nations and evangelize people from all ethnic and racial groups. As a passage in the Bible states, “There is neither Jew nor Greek... for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28, New International Version).” Despite this belief, the nation's religious congregations have long been highly racially segregated. Multiracial congregations are very rare, less than 8 percent of the over 300,000 religious congregations in the United States are racially mixed (DeYoung et al. 2004; Emerson and Smith 2000). There are two primary reasons given to explain this reality—racism and culture preservation. First, separate ethnic and racial congregations emerged historically as a result of racism. In reflecting on the experience of black churches, historian C. Eric Lincoln writes, “There was no room in the White Church for the black Christians who needed to be persons as well as believers. In consequence, even in the face of the formidable odds that would seek to suppress it, control it, or laugh it to scorn, the Black Church was as inevitable as religion itself (1999:53).” Cultural reasons are also often cited to support separate ethnic and racial congregations. For many Asian American groups, churches play an important role in assisting immigrants to pass down their respective cultures to their American born children. Church members corporately celebrate ethnic holidays, eat ethnic foods, converse in their native languages, and engage in regular face-to-face contact with co-ethnics. Networks established within the church can become important resources for the generations raised in the United States, not only in terms of providing mutual support, but also in finding potential spouses. The tension between ethnic particularism and religious universalism is not as strongly felt by immigrants whose limited language ability and cultural familiarity in America make it hard for them to participate in mainstream religious organizations. However, the tension is pronounced among the second generation who does not have such limitations and adhere to a universal faith like Christianity.
et al. 2004). Currently, the second-generation Korean American churches in my study are grappling with this dilemma and striving to understand and reconcile the tension between being a “church for all nations” and a “church for predominately Koreans.”

METHOD

The analysis presented in this study is based on data obtained through participant observation, interviews, surveys, and reviews of relevant literature. I conducted 108 structured in-depth interviews with leaders and members of 22 Korean American churches during 1996–2006. Of the 108 interviews, 58 interviews were conducted with pastors and church leaders. Interviews were conducted with first generation Koreans as well as with non-Asian individuals who are active members of these churches.

In addition to participant observation and interviews, I also administered a simple survey consisting of 37 questions at the following five churches: Faith Church, Fruitful Church, Family Church, Flowing Life Church, and University Church. The survey questions focused on demographic information as well as general attitudes on racial and religious issues. I distributed approximately 510 surveys to the five churches and received back a total of 340 completed surveys. The response rate for the survey was 67 percent. The five churches were selected for their large congregation sizes as well as willingness from the church leadership to administer the survey. The surveys were passed out during small group Bible studies and collected immediately after they were filled out.

In addition to personal interviews, I engaged in participant observation for over 10 years (1996–2006) at 22 churches as well as related church events and seminars. My participant observation consisted of “joining in” on Sunday worship services, small group Bible studies, revivals, leadership meetings, fellowship gatherings, and in numerous other church-related activities. At all of the churches, the majority of the members are highly acculturated, well educated, and upwardly mobile professionals and college students. Most of the members, who are in their twenties and thirties, were either born in the United States or immigrated when they were children. All of the religious services as well as informal conversations are conducted in English.

Of the 22 churches in my study, six are mono-ethnic churches where over 80 percent of the members are Korean. Sixteen are pan-Asian churches where over 80 percent of the members are Asian but less than 80 percent are Korean. At the present stage of development, none of the churches in my study is multiracial. DeYoung et al. (2004) have defined a multiracial church as one in which no one racial group is 80 percent or more of the congregation. The majority, 15, of the churches in my study were established during the 1990s,
two of the churches began in the 1980s, and five were planted in 2000 or later. With respect to church size, seven of the churches have less than 100 members, nine of the churches have 100–200 members, five of the churches have between 200 and 500 members, and one church in my study has over 3000 members. Ten out of the 22 churches are nondenominational and the rest belong to one of the following denominations: Southern Baptist, Presbyterian USA, Evangelical Covenant, United Methodist, Missionary Church, and the Christian Reformed Church.

MONO-ETHNIC CHURCHES

Six of the 22 senior pastors in this study argue that Korean churches will not and should not disappear or evolve into multiracial organizations. All six of these pastors are 1.5 generation Korean Americans who immigrated to the United States in their teens. Their commitment to cultural preservation is largely a reflection of their bilingual and bicultural identity. First, they believe that the ethnic church is the main institution responsible for preserving the Korean culture and passing it down to the next generation. Secondly, they argue that there is a distinct “Korean American” spirituality and it is the responsibility of Korean American churches to be carriers, preservers, and in some cases re-interpreters of this spirituality.

First, several second-generation ministers believe that Korean churches should serve as sites of resistance against the accommodative forces and pressures of the American mainstream. Resistance, in the case of the Korean churches, takes the form of affirming one’s own cultural heritage. Although native-born Korean Americans are raised in the United States, the pastors assert that they continue to be bound by cultural traditions, practices, and values from Korea that serve as a basis for ethnic solidarity. They argue that Korean churches must intentionally play an active role in preserving, fostering, and shaping Korean American culture. Those that reach out primarily to fellow Korean Americans insist that although all Christians are called to be united, unity should not come at the expense of ethnic identity and ethnic difference.

In addition, they believe that ethnic homogeneity promotes a greater level of efficiency within the churches. “I have not yet seen a successful multiracial church in America,” remarked Pastor Chang, who believes that a multiracial church is great in principle but ineffective in practice—“as church growth experts say, the homogeneous principle does work. If you have a church with many different ethnic groups, you’ll be spending most of your time trying to sort through the differences, let alone getting the ministry done.” He rejects the notion of an Asian American identity. In his years at Fuller Theological Seminary, he joined an Asian American Ministry Organization and found that although the organization touted its multi-ethnic membership, in reality it was primarily the Japanese Americans students who led and controlled
the organization. Although Korean Americans were the overwhelming majority of Asians on that campus, they were not included in part of the decision making process nor were their needs adequately addressed by the organization. In response, he concluded that the different ethnic groups would benefit more by retaining each own small but unified voice.

Chang strongly advocates the maintenance of Korean culture and identity. However, unlike the majority of first generation pastors who view language as the primary determinant of culture, he is concerned with the passage of what he views as the ul or essence of Korean culture, which he describes as a unique expression of passion,

There is a distinct passion and drive among Koreans no matter where they are. This passion is a product of a history of suffering. I don’t believe that passion is limited to a certain generation. This conviction or passion is what we need to pass down through the generations.

He also alludes to a common set of cultural values such as filial piety and respect for elders that are rooted in traditional Confucian value systems. Similarly, Pastor Moon of Flowing Life Church believes that Korean culture involves much more than language, “If the main component of culture was language, there really is no hope for the future generations in terms of culture maintenance.” He argues that the Korean community needs to coherently grasp and articulate the true understanding of what it means to be Korean and after accomplishing that, to focus on passing those qualities down through the generations. He describes the culture in terms of a Korean mentality,

What needs to be passed down is this “Korean mentality” which encompasses the traits of perseverance, passion, and a strong survival instinct that have been wrought through a history of suffering among Koreans.

He believes that there is a specific reason why God created different ethnic groups and that the goal of mankind is not to blend into one culture but to preserve the distinct cultures and exist in a state of cultural diversity. He cites the biblical reference to the different tribes in heaven singing and praising God in their native tongues as indication of the importance and persistence of cultural diversity in God’s perspective.

There is a marked generational difference in how the Korean culture is defined. For the immigrant generation, language is seen as the most essential component of Korean culture. Park, the pastor of a large Korean immigrant church, when asked how important it was for the church to be involved in the maintenance of Korean culture, instinctively answered the question in terms of language preservation,

When I think of Korean culture, the only thing that comes to mind is the Korean language. For Korean people, when they think of culture, they think primarily about language. That’s all there is really in our minds.
An emphasis on language as the major determinant of culture has been documented in past research on European immigrants during the early 1900s. Herberg found that among the first generation of immigrants, because Americans did not recognize groups based on their regional source of origin but on their linguistic differences, “an emphasis on language gradually outlined the new character of the immigrant groups and answered the aching question of identity (1955:25).”

The pastors who advocate a mono-ethnic congregation argue that there is a distinct Korean American spirituality that must be preserved, practiced, and passed down to subsequent generations. Among the different elements of Korean spirituality, the most common one that pastors cited was the “Korean” way of praying which is characterized by a high level of passion, fervency, and urgency. At one prayer meeting that I attended, the pastor exhorted his members to kneel on the ground, cry out in a loud voice, and fervently engage in tongsong kido (unison prayer). Inside a dimly lit sanctuary, the people wept, pounded the ground with their fists, and shouted “Jesus” and “Lord” at the top of their voices. The themes of “deliverance” and “blessing” resonated through most of the pleading with members petitioning for spiritual breakthrough, physical well-being, and material provisions for themselves and their children. Korean Christians reject a purely cerebral attitude toward prayer; rather, prayer is a holistic exercise that involves the individual’s body, emotions, mind, and spirit. Past scholars have noted the influence of Shamanism, the indigenous religion of Korean society, in Korean Protestant spirituality (Hyuck 2004; Kim et al. 2001; Kwon 1995). The yearning for supernatural power and access to the spiritual realm through rituals is deeply embedded within the Shamanistic worldview. Although officially rejected by Korean Christians, Shamanistic views and practices remain as undercurrents in Korean and Korean American Protestantism (Kim et al. 2001).

Other leaders point to the African American church as an example of an institution that fostered a unique cultural expression of spirituality. According to one pastor,

*The Black church has done a tremendous job in developing a unique Black Christianity... you can see it in their preaching, music, theology, community activism.*

They believe that the preservation of the ethnic Korean American church will provide the fertile soil necessary for the development of Korean American spirituality. In relation to the development of a distinct ethnic spirituality, one pastor also suggested that an individual’s experience of God is inherently tied to his cultural experiences and identity. According to Pastor Yoon of Disciple

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Church, “To a woman, God comes to a woman as a woman’s experience. God speaks uniquely to each cultural group and so we must all find our place within this larger message.” Yoon embraces the notion of a lived theology where the cultural experiences of second-generation Korean Americans are inextricably bound with their religious experiences. In Yoon’s perspective, in order for second-generation Korean Americans to authentically experience God, they need to do so within a context that understands and integrates their ethnic and cultural selves. Mono-ethnic churches provide a supportive community in which individuals can embrace a Korean American identity that is both dignified and affirmed. Kelly Chong (1998), in her research on second-generation Korean Americans in Chicago, observed that the strong sense of ethnic identity among second-generation church attendees reflects a form of “defensive ethnicity” against their perceived marginal status within American society as a racial minority group. The ethnic church, according to Chong, functions as a refuge from marginalization along with a positive social identity.

A few of the ministers of mono-ethnic churches believe that God has given second-generation Korean Americans a distinct divine mission. One leader expressed that in the arena of Christianity, Koreans have enjoyed a special grace and favor from God. He points to the rapid rise of Christianity in South Korea and the existence of Korean mega-churches as proof of God’s special purpose for Koreans in this generation,

Koreans will be the leaders in the next big move of God. Nobody in this world can deny that South Korea has received a special visitation from God. Christian leaders from all over the world are going to South Korea to learn from the pastors there.

He believes that God has a specific, tailor made mission for English speaking Korean Americans to serve as a catalyst for spiritual revival not only in America but globally.

The level of acculturation and comfort that the senior pastor feels in mainstream American society shapes the level of ethnic homogeneity in second-generation churches. Pastors of mono-ethnic congregations immigrated to the United States in their early teens and are bi-lingual and bi-cultural. Many shared that they feel more at home with the Korean language and are more comfortable with their Korean ethnic and cultural identity. Their level of acculturation and comfort with mainstream American society, culture, and non-Koreans in general all play a significant role in determining the extent to which their church’s ethnic boundaries can be stretched. In describing his comfort level with non-Koreans Pastor Yoon reflected,

Who I am is the whole of me from my language to my food preferences. If I invite a Black person to my home, what kind of food would I serve him? Would he eat kimchee ji gae? Just as I would try to take a white pastor to Mimi’s Café, I’m certainly willing to accommodate to others as who they are but when we try to be as accommodating, we end up losing or denying who we really are.
Employing the family analogy, second-generation pastors insist that churches must be a place where Korean Americans feel comfortable and secure among co-ethnic “brothers” and “sisters” who have shared a similar set of life experiences. Comfort, belonging, and security are central themes among the leaders who advocate a mono-ethnic church. Because churches function so much like families, inevitably, people want to join churches where they feel comfortable with like-minded individuals who have shared a similar set of life experiences.

Christy, a 1.5 generation Korean American and mother of two young children, values her church because it’s the one place where she and her family can have weekly exposure to the Korean culture, “I want my kids to grow up knowing and being proud of who they are . . . that they are Korean Americans.” Many of the members told me that it was the ethnic composition that attracted them to their churches. They were explicitly looking for a predominately Korean American church and appreciate the fact that their ethnic identity is practiced and celebrated within their churches. The fact that the majority of the members are fellow Koreans makes the church feel, in the words of one member, “more like a close family and less like an impersonal organization.”

When I asked one pastor how he would respond to someone who would accuse his church, a mono-ethnic second-generation Korean American church, of being ethnocentric and overly insular, he replied,

> There is something about ethnic and cultural bonds that remain alive even with the forces of acculturation into American society. There is a sense among people who come to this church whose outside world is all white. When they come to this setting, there is a sense of “wow, I like it.”

In mono-ethnic churches, the Korean ethnicity and culture are embraced and celebrated in a variety of ways. At Resurrection Church, the members are involved and committed to issues, causes, and organizations that affect the larger Korean community. Several of the key members of the church are also active leaders and members in community agencies such as the Korean Journal, Women’s Organization Reaching Koreans (WORK), Korean American Coalition (KAC), and Korean American Youth and Community Center (KYCC). They were also actively involved in raising relief aid for North Korean famine victims during the nineties.

At mono-ethnic churches, Korean phrases are embedded in sermons as well as in casual conversations among members. These churches offer Korean Americans who were either born in the United States or who immigrated at a young age the context in which they can connect with, explore, and reinvent their “Koreanness.” “I’ve become more Koreanized since I joined my church,” remarked one individual who immigrated to the United States when he was four years old. When asked to elaborate on what he meant by “Koreanized,” he referred to aspects such as food, language, ethnic locations, and values. By “Koreanizing” Christianity at these churches, second-generation Korean
Americans are able to carve out unique spaces in which their ethnic and religious identities intersect. Several members of mono-ethnic churches remarked that cultural differences warrant the existence of an ethnic specific church because although the Christian faith calls for all believers to be united in worship, each ethnic group’s unique culture influences and shapes its expressions of worship.

It’s in the area of outreach and evangelism that mono-ethnic churches face their most significant internal contradictions and challenges. Although they are committed to fulfilling the great commission which calls all believers to “share the gospel” with others, they are also caught in a challenging dilemma because their ethnic exclusivity limits their outreach to fellow Korean Americans, which poses multiple levels of discontent, guilt, and ambivalence among their membership. Kerry, an active member of Resurrection Church expressed that she felt torn because on the one hand she loves her church because she feels comfortable among fellow Korean Americans yet on the other hand she wants her church to be more active in sharing the gospel with all non-Christians irrespective of their ethnic backgrounds,

On the one hand, I was looking for a church that is Korean American but I’m realizing that I don’t want it to stay Korean American. I want it to become more multi-ethnic . . . the point of church should not be in keeping the Korean identity. Rather it should be on sharing the gospel.

Members of mono-ethnic churches have repeatedly expressed frustration with the limitation they experience in evangelizing and reaching out to their non-Korean friends. In many ways, mono-ethnic churches have crippled the evangelistic initiative of their members because the reality is that their members work, go to school with, and associate with non-Koreans. Although they want to reach out to their non-Korean friends, they are reluctant to because their friends would not feel comfortable in a predominately Korean church.

PAN-ASIAN CHURCHES

While ministers of mono-ethnic churches desire for their churches to remain predominately Korean American, at many second-generation churches the ethnic boundary of “Korean” has been stretched to a racial boundary of “Asian.” Sixteen out of 22 churches in this study have a pan-Asian composition and among them, six envision their churches remaining predominately Asian American while 10 view their current pan-Asian composition as a transitional stage en route toward becoming a church for all races. None of the six ministers of Asian American churches are opposed to becoming multiracial but they believe that due to the reality that most people would chose to worship with those who are racially similar, it makes more sense for them to focus their energies and resources on reaching fellow Asian Americans. One minister
remarked, “The truth is...God is sending us Asian Americans to minister to...not Whites, not Blacks, not Hispanics...they are not attracted to our church. They come once and never return again.”

The fact that the majority of non-Korean Asian members were introduced to their churches through their friends indicates that among second-generation Korean Americans in Los Angeles, friendship networks are largely constructed along racial lines. This, according to many that I interviewed, is due to the fact that individuals in American society view themselves and are viewed by the larger society in racial as opposed to ethnic categories. Paul, a second-generation male remarked, “You could be Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, or whatever. But whatever your national differences, when you’re in America, they call you ‘chink’ or ‘jap’.” The similarities in life experiences and cultural orientation, largely derived by their shared status as children of immigrants and as racial minorities in the United States, among different Asian American groups have served as the common denominator drawing Asian Americans together. Several scholars have pointed to the reality that second-generation Asian Americans tend to develop friendships with other Asian Americans. Nazli Kibria (2003), in her examination of the way pan-ethnicity operates at the level of friendships, found that Asian American friendships are forged around commonalities of race and culture. Having shared a racial identity in the United States, Asian Americans have collectively experienced racism as well as being stereotyped as “nerdy,” “foreign,” and “passive.” In addition, they also shared common experiences that derived from the values of growing up with immigrant parents. Kibria argues that the pan-ethnic nature of friendships among second-generation Asian Americans is due to a shared worldview or understanding that stems from the commonalities of race and culture.

Yen Le Espiritu (1992) argues that racialist constructions of Asians as homogeneous contribute in the forging of alliances and affiliations among ethnic and immigrant groups of Asian origin. She further argues that pan-ethnic organizations build affective ties and develop pan-ethnic consciousness where they did not exist prior to the organization. Espiritu concludes that an emergent subculture develops within organizational spaces, “by participating in these pan-Asian institutions, Asian Americans begin to develop common views of themselves and of one another, and similar interpretations of their experiences and of the larger society (1992:172).” However, her focus is on how Asian Americans have institutionalized pan-Asianism as their political instrument and in so doing she analyzes pan-ethnicity in its public and political dimensions but does not address its private or religious dimensions.

Russell Jeung (2004) focuses on the role of pan-ethnicity in the formation of religious organization in Northern California. He compares evangelical and mainline Asian American churches and found that the two employ different narratives as symbolic to Asian American group identity. Whereas evangelical ministers emphasize lifestyle, value systems, and social networks of Asian Americans as their defining characteristics, mainline ministers focus on their
racialized experiences as the primary bond of Pan-Asian solidarity. The churches in my study, both mainline and evangelical, are similar in orientation to the evangelical churches in Jeung’s study. Asians do not share a sense of common history or national roots, but they do share common experiences as children of immigrants and as racial minorities in the United States and a common value system that is derived largely from Confucian teachings. These commonalities increase the level of connection, identification, and camaraderie that binds Asian Americans together at these new churches. For example, Tom, a member of Resurrection Church expressed that in any given situation, he would feel more comfortable with and will naturally gravitate toward another Asian American,

There’s something about being an Asian American in this country. For example, I’d be at a big party and there would be another Asian person in the room. By the time the night is over, I’d be talking and socializing with that person only. It’s strange but we feel more comfortable with each other maybe because we grew up in a similar way, as racial minorities with Asian immigrant parents.

Second-generation churches provide the institutional spaces where Asian Americans, bound by shared values, life orientations, and experiences, can congregate together under a common religious identity.

Many of the churches that began exclusively Korean have modified and enlarged their vision to include other Asian groups. A host of changes have been made within the churches with the hopes of stretching their target population beyond one ethnic group. They have intentionally omitted Korean expressions from sermons and teaching and have opted for more inclusive language, and are intentionally diversifying their leadership to include more non-Koreans in decision making.

The fact that the ethnic boundaries at second-generation Korean American churches have been stretched to include other Asian American groups highlights the reality that the emphasis on ethnicity and ethnic group experiences in the United States has often confused the important distinctions between race and ethnicity. Unlike the immigrant generation, the second generation fundamentally identify themselves in racial categories because on a day-to-day level, they’re treated as Asian Americans as opposed to Korean Americans. According to one woman,

Most people here on campus or anywhere else for that matter don’t see me as a Korean but rather as an Asian. Because that’s how people in this country classify people—by their race.

Omi and Winant (1986) argue that race has always played a central role in American politics and life. Race in the United States, they argue, should be treated as a fundamental and independent category through which relationships are ordered. In a similar vein, Antony Alumkal (2003) asserts that Asian Americans retreat to churches and fellowships as an act of self-preservation in
a society where “race” continually matters. The lives of Korean Americans are strongly influenced by their race or national origin regardless of how much they may choose not to identify themselves in ethnic or racial terms.

The majority of the respondents understood the boundary of “Asian American” as not simply racial, but also cultural in substance. As Bacon (1997) notes, the second-generation experience in the United States is commonly understood and interpreted around an “immigrant narrative” which revolves around a series of oppositional dichotomies—immigrant versus American, traditional versus modern. Integral to the “immigrant narrative” were having to grow up with parents who did not speak English, feeling torn by having to choose between American versus Asian values, navigating through identity crisis, feeling a sense of not belonging to either the mainstream or immigrant society, and growing up with Asian values that emphasize family, education, hard work, and respect for elders.

What is most puzzling about Asian American churches is that although the institutions are bound by race, the subjects of race and racism are never explicitly addressed within the churches. Race exists more as a silent subtext within Asian American churches. There can be several reasons for the absence of discourses on race. First, the majority of Asian Americans who attend second-generation churches believe that racism against Asians does exist but it is mostly attitudinal prejudice that does not hinder them from succeeding in the United States. As middle-class, well-educated professionals, few of the members of these churches have experienced overt racism and harassment in diverse Southern California. Secondly, many are drawn to Asian American churches, not because of overt racism against them in mainstream institutions but rather because they feel more comfortable with others who have had a similar set of life experiences and therefore hold similar worldviews and values. Finally, there may be a lack of awareness or commitment to racial justice among the ministers. The pastors that I interviewed expressed that their primary responsibility was to help their parishioners grow spiritually, and feared that focusing on racial issues would, in the words of one minister, “waste our energies and take us down the wrong path.” Similarly, Gerardo Marti (2004), in his study of Mosaic Church in Los Angeles, found that although the church is racially diverse, racism, race, and ethnic differences are never addressed publicly.

Lastly, because these churches are largely run by Korean Americans, non-Korean members can feel marginalized in a church sub-culture that is highly influenced by the Korean culture. At several of the Asian American churches, the non-Korean Asian American members have had to accommodate to Korean ways in order to fully participate in the activities of the church. For instance, according to one Chinese American member,

*I learned and use many Korean words since attending this church. I call my pastor’s wife samonim (honorific title for pastor’s wife) the older guys hyung [older brother] and the older gals unni [older sister].*
Newcomers are expected to assimilate into the church culture, which inevitably reflects Korean culture because they comprise the majority of the congregation. When asked if the Korean majority forces their culture on the rest, one minister remarked, “We don’t do it intentionally. We want to be sensitive to the other Asian cultures but it’s very tricky to determine how much and in what ways ethnic culture should express itself in our church.”

**MULTIRACIAL CHURCHES**

Pastor Choi of Fruitful Church sees his current racial boundary as just one necessary step in the steady transition from a mono-ethnic to a multiracial congregation,

> When we first planted this church ten years ago, we were hoping to develop an Asian American church. Now that we are fully Asian American, I realize that this should not be our final destination. We need to stretch our boundaries even further and become fully multiracial.

He, along with several other ministers that I interviewed, embrace the goal of multiracial churches and argue that mono-ethnic churches are inherently problematic for those who adhere to a Christian worldview because the Bible clearly teaches that within the church, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28, New International Version).” They further argue that those who want to remain within their respective ethnic or pan-ethnic congregations do so simply out of convenience and comfort—motivations which they believe are inherently self-centered, narrow minded, and unbiblical. Leaders who desire for their churches to become multiracial argue that multiculturalism is a given reality in American society, particularly in places like Los Angeles, and that churches need to embrace and appreciate this fact.

Ten of the churches in my study desire to transform their churches into multiracial congregations, however, they embrace different strategies for getting there. Seven of the 10 churches embrace what Emerson and Smith (2000) refer to as the color-blind approach. Churches that employ this strategy emphasize a shared Christian identity to form the basis of community, and deemphasize the significance of ethnic and racial differences. The other three churches have employed a differing strategy to reach their goal of becoming a racially diverse congregation. Rather than ignoring race, they have openly addressed ethnic and racial differences and have intentionally brought these issues to the forefront of their church’s culture and conversations.

The senior pastor of Joyful Sound Church strives to continually highlight ethnic and racial differences in order to shift the ethnic composition of his church,
We discuss differences in ethnicity all the time, especially in preaching and in small groups. It’s part of the conversation of our church. Sure there are a lot of differences but like in any relationship where you are intimate, you will have to sort through differences.

From the pulpit, the pastor intentionally keeps racial and diversity issues on the front burner. For example, in 2006, drawing from racial themes in the movie Crash, the pastors of Joyful Sound preached a six-part sermon the subject of racism and racial reconciliation. Another way in which ethnic and cultural differences are highlighted at the church is through music. Brian, the church’s praise leader said that they have made intentional efforts to incorporate different cultural forms and expressions of praise music,

We have a gospel choir in our church that looks and sounds a lot like African American gospel choirs. A few weeks ago, we sang a Swahili song in our worship service. We’ve also sung Spanish songs.

Heeding the advice of recent church growth experts who have argued that churches essentially attract people with the same profile as the leadership, one strategy has been to intentionally diversify the ethnic make-up of the church leadership. With the hopes of attracting more African Americans into their congregation, Joyful Sound Church hired an African American minister to join the pastoral staff. The African American pastor, an engineer in his early thirties who aside from his race, fits the general socioeconomic profile of the congregation, preaches to the congregation once a month in the main Sunday worship service. At one worship service, the African American preacher, dressed like the rest of the congregation in a simple button down oxford shirt and khaki pants, stood on the stage holding a small Bible in one hand and preached, relying mostly on personal illustrations, on the subject of divinely opened doors. The majority of the congregation, Asian Americans in their early twenties to late thirties, were being educated or given a glimpse of an entirely different cultural experience. The preacher spoke about his experiences growing up in a predominately African American neighborhood where every kid in the neighborhood “had the same poster of Martin Luther King hanging on his bedroom wall.”

A few pastors, particularly those who advocate a mono-ethnic church, have been critical of these efforts to diversify the leadership and have accused these churches of administering an “affirmative action” policy within the organization. According to one minister,

I think many of the churches have gone too far in trying to become multiracial. I know of churches that have an affirmative action policy where they’re trying to fill some representative quota in leadership. They want their praise team to be racially and ethnically diverse, so they’ll just find any person who happens to be Black or Hispanic to join the praise team, regardless of their spiritual maturity.

Despite the criticism leveled against them, there is a general conviction among Joyful Sound’s leaders and members that increased social contact and
development of relationships across racial lines will naturally dispel racist stereotypes and contribute in the creation of a truly multiracial Christian community. However, despite efforts to diversify the congregation and much to the dismay of its leaders, Joyful Sound Church has continued to attract predominately Asian Americans who comprise over 80 percent of its membership.

Whereas at Joyful Sound Church, ethnic and cultural differences are intentionally brought to the forefront in the church’s conversation and sub-culture, at Fruitful Church differences are rarely highlighted for the sake of emphasizing the areas of commonality among the members. In addition to sharing a common faith, the non-Asian members at Fruitful Church, who make up approximately 15 percent of the church’s population, share the same class, educational, and generational status. The majority of them were introduced to the church by their friends on college campuses or in the workplace, and they shared that the primary reason for joining the church is because of the high level of friendliness among its members. Although they are racially distinct from the majority of the church members, the development of friendships along with commonalities in socio-economic background, religion, and generation provided enough connective points for them to remain within the church.

Mike, a half-black and half-Latino male in his twenties who was raised by a single mother in an impoverished neighborhood in South Los Angeles, has been an active member at Fruitful Church for over a year. He was introduced to the church through a Chinese American co-worker at a large accounting firm that he was interning at during his undergraduate years at USC. Despite ethnic and racial differences, Mike shared that he was immediately attracted to the church because the people were so friendly and welcoming toward him. In addition, he believes that a shared common identity as Christians overshadows cultural and ethnic differences among his friends at the church. In addition to the Christian identity, shared class and generational experiences provide the common ground for connection among the members. According to Mike, cultural differences are relatively minor in comparison to the wealth of commonalities that he and his fellow church mates share,

Sure, we may be different races or ethnicities but we also have a lot in common. Most of the people at this church are college students or have finished college. This alone makes us very similar. My church friends and I talk about sports, movies, music, our jobs, school, going to the beach... stuff like that.

At churches like Fruitful Church, shared identities that revolve around education, employment, generation, and religion provide the common ground on which people of diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds can come together.

Gerardo Marti (2004) found in his study of Mosaic Church in Los Angeles, which has a membership of one-third Asian, one-third Latino, and one-third Anglo, that racial diversity and difference is purposely ignored
and obscured. According to Marti, ethnic differences are discussed in private interactions, but they are not central to the identity of Mosaic members or to the congregational culture as a whole. In contrast to the color-blind approach, Kathleen Garces-Foley (2007) found in her study of Evergreen Church, with a congregation composed of 75 percent Asian American and 25 percent non-Asian, that racial and ethnic differences are openly discussed and institutionalized into the vision and culture of the church. According to both authors, what is interesting about these differing approaches is that the churches that employ a color-blind strategy are attracting a more diverse membership than churches that are intentionally highlighting race and racial difference within their churches. Marti argues that intentionally seeking diversity is an ineffective strategy for gaining it.

In her study of Evergreen Church, Kathleen Garces-Foley found that “matters of communication, food, and marriage came up most frequently as a source of disconnective points caused by cultural barriers (2007: 104).” In my conversations with church members, I also found the same three areas cited as points of conflict and misunderstanding, with dating being the most sensitive and heightened source of tension. A large percentage of the members of these churches are singles in their twenties and early thirties who are very interested in finding their future mates among fellow church members. While all the Asian singles that I spoke with seem to accept the idea of inter-racial marriage in theory, it is quite another matter for them to share that they themselves were willing to marry outside of their race. Although this issue is not highlighted and discussed openly among singles, it is very much an area of concern and tension, particularly among the churches’ non-Asian members. Peter, an African American male, told me that in the area of dating, there seems to be a glass ceiling for non-Asians: “I think I’m accepted and treated as an equal at this church in every way except in the area of dating. The dating scene is really confusing here at our church.”

At these churches, a significant percentage of dating and marriage occurs outside ethnic lines but not necessarily outside racial lines. The majority of second-generation Korean Americans who attend the churches in the study do not plan to cross racial boundaries in marriage. Among unmarried Korean Americans, 12 percent indicated that in choosing a marriage partner, race is not an important variable. The overwhelming majority, 88 percent, stated that they preferred to marry within their own race. Furthermore, 81 percent stated that they preferred to marry someone within their own ethnic group. Among the married respondents in my sample, the overwhelming majority (93 percent) was married to co-ethnics. An interesting finding was that among the non-Asian church members (80 percent white, 10 percent Latino, and 10 percent black) in the survey who accounted for nearly 10 percent of the survey

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4Congregational Survey.
population, 95 percent stated that race doesn’t matter for them when choosing a marriage partner. This figure points to the fact that the non-Asians who attend these churches embrace a higher level of “color-blindness” when it comes to dating and marriage.

When individuals shared that they were open to marrying outside of their race, they implicitly were referring to marrying whites and in some cases Latinos. Kathy, a second-generation student at the University of California, Los Angeles, expressed that her parents would adamantly disapprove of her marrying or dating an African American man,

My parents have always told me ever since I was really young that they want me to marry a Korean man. During high school, I only dated white guys and that bothered them but they eventually got used to it. If it was a Black guy... well that would be another story altogether. They’d probably kill me or disown me. Korean is best. White is tolerable. Black is forbidden.

It’s important to note that marriage partner preference among the second generation is formed by both personal preference as well as perceived constraints. Danny, a second-generation male, told me that his preference for dating Korean women is shaped by the fact in the United States, the media portrayal of Asian men has not been favorable and has negatively impacted their level of desirability, “I’ll most likely marry a Korean woman. I would be open to marrying a white woman but most white women are not attracted to Asian men... at least that’s been my general experience growing up.” Yen Le Espiritu (2007) found in her study that, in the United States, Asian American women are desirable to white men because Asians as a group are socially constructed as a feminine race by the dominant society. This reality also makes Asian American men undesirable to white women and to Asian American women who have embraced mainstream social norms.

Another interesting feature of second-generation churches is that several of the pastors feel that they are strategically positioned to serve as a bridge for longstanding racial divisions within the American church. Multiracial congregations in the United States are rare and less than 8 percent of the nation’s churches are estimated to be multi-ethnic (Emerson and Woo 2006). It is popularly observed that Sunday mornings are the most segregated time of the week. Nonetheless, one second-generation Korean American pastor shared that because he himself is a racial minority, he can more compassionately and sensitively serve as a much needed racial reconciling agent in this country. He believes that his church along with other like-minded churches can effectively alter the current reality of racially segregated churches. This sentiment is shared by several mainline denominations that are beginning to view second-generation Korean American Christians as instrumental agents in the development of multiracial congregations. Whereas in the past, mainline denominations have worked with ethnic pastors to develop ethnic churches, denominations today are beginning to woo second-generation Korean American with the hopes of developing
multiracial churches. Pastor Yoo of Voyage Church, believes that he can impact the Christian Reformed Church denomination in a significant way through his multiracial church plant. He believes that there is a sincere desire among mainline denominations to build churches “where people of all colors can come together to build a genuine color blind Christian worshipping community.” Yet, there is also a sense that due to the longstanding racial tensions within mainline denominations, Caucasians cannot effectively be the leading agents in building multiracial churches. According to Yoo,

“Our church is one of the first multi-ethnic church plants. They [the denomination] are very interested in young people like me. We [second generation Korean Americans] could very well be the answer to a pressing need . . . more multiracial churches and racial reconciliation among American Christians.”

Second-generation pastors like Yoo believe that, whereas the African American church was used by God to fight against racial oppression, God desires to use Korean Americans as agents of racial reconciliation and unity among believers. Currently, Yoo receives a salary from the denomination and has hired two other staff members, an African American male minister and a Korean American woman, to assist him in his church planting endeavor. In order to attract a diverse ethnic population, Yoo has also formed a three member advisory committee composed of a Latino, an African American, and a Caucasian minister who will take turns preaching to the newly formed church.

Churches like Joyful Sound, Fruitful, and Voyage aim to not only transform their own churches, their larger goal is to serve as a catalyst in transforming American Protestantism that has been so deeply divided along racial lines. They hope that their churches can serve as examples to the rest of Protestant America that it is possible for the faith to unite diverse racial groups into one unified worshipping community. Social scientists, in focusing solely on how American society impacted immigrant groups, have neglected to study the ways in which ethnic groups have impacted mainstream America. The study of second-generation churches, particularly in its current period of transition, experimentation, and innovation, provides a colorful and intriguing case study of how ethnic minorities, rather than simply adopting mainstream Christianity, can and do create new forms of religious institutions which in turn are poised to transform the practice and institutional landscape of religion in America.

CONCLUSION

In the area of ethnic composition, second-generation churches are currently in a stage of experimentation and flux. It is well known that individuals and groups create boundaries as a way of differentiating themselves from the
larger society and as a way of affirming their unique identities. At this juncture, second-generation Korean Americans in their hybrid third spaces exist in a state of creative tension in respect to their ethnic boundaries. Some churches draw tighter, more fixed boundaries around ethnicity while other churches embrace looser, more fluid boundaries that change in response to changes in the ethnic and racial composition of their membership.

Documenting the current stage of experimentation and transition, this study of second-generation churches provides important insights on the role of religion and religious organizations in the adaptation process of the offspring of post-65 immigrants. Among the three types of churches, mono-ethnic churches are the most explicit in retaining and passing culture down to subsequent generations. However, among Korean American ministers, only a minority wants their churches to remain mono-ethnic, and those that do are predominately 1.5 generation ministers who are bilingual and bicultural. The growth and popularity of mono-ethnic churches will be dampened, in large part, by the declining rate of immigration from Korea (Kim et al. 2001). Nonetheless, mono-ethnic churches will continue to exist and service second-generation Korean Americans who want to preserve their Korean culture and practice religion among co-ethnics.

Currently, the majority of the churches in this study, 16 out of 22, have a pan-Asian composition. However, 10 of them view their current pan-Asian composition as a transitional stage en route toward becoming a church for all races. The remaining six ministers of Asian American churches are not opposed to becoming multiracial but they believe that due to the reality that most people would choose to worship with those who are racially similar, it makes more sense for them to focus their energies and resources on reaching fellow Asian Americans. Although it is still too early to determine whether second-generation church will be able to attract a significant number of non-Asians, it is important to note that at several second-generation Korean American churches there is a concerted effort to move beyond a pan-ethnic church to a multi-ethnic church. Stephen Warner argues that racial dynamics are not permanent factors affecting post-65 immigrant churches and that “the irreducibility of race applies primarily to the African American experience (1998:14).” However, at its current period of development, second-generation churches, regardless of their efforts to attract other races, have largely drawn other Asian Americans into their congregations.

Michael Emerson and Christian Smith (2000) propose that multiracial congregations are rare in the United States because of the “niche overlap effect” and “niche edge effect” which suggest that racial groups carve out niches within the overall church landscape. When one racial group becomes the dominant group in a church, this core group will form a critical mass that shapes the identity of the church. Furthermore, the church will attract mainly those who belong to the same race as the core group. In a predominately Asian American church, non-Asians will perceive their minority
status and most likely leave the church. Whites, who enjoy the privilege of majority status in mainstream society, are not drawn to Asian American churches where they must take on minority status. This minority status clearly affects who joins and who doesn’t. In its current state of development, the vision of multiracial churches emerging from the hybrid third space has yet to be realized.

Four of the churches in the study are approaching a congregational makeup of 79 percent Asian and 21 percent non-Asian but they are seen by outsiders and well as among their own church members as an Asian American church. One of the pastors commented, “I think that as long as Asians are in the majority, our church will always be seen as an Asian American church. Even if 21 percent of our members are non-Asian, most people would not consider us a multiracial church. For white churches, this same logic does not apply. Why is that?” “Mainstream” churches have a hidden ethnicity that is normalized in our society.

Immigration historians have depicted the second generation as a transitional generation—on the steady march toward the inevitable decline of ethnic identity and allegiance. My research suggests an alternative route. By harnessing religion and innovatively creating hybrid religious institutions, second-generation Korean Americans are assertively defining and shaping their own ethnic and religious futures. Rather than assimilating into mainstream churches or inheriting the churches of their immigrant parents, second-generation pastors are creating their own hybrid third spaces—new autonomous churches that are shaped by multiple frames of reference. These newly formed churches are currently operating as laboratories where American born Koreans have latitude to innovatively fashion religion that is uniquely their own. Furthermore, within many of these churches, the second generation is reaching out to all Americans, irrespective of their ethnicity or race. The growth of second-generation hybrid churches marks an empirical and theoretical turn from past immigration.

REFERENCES


