



INTRODUCTION

Growing Healthy Households of God

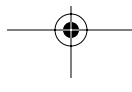
PETER CHA AND HELEN LEE

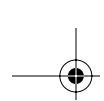


JOYCE LEE-JOHNSON SAT DUMBFOUNDED AT THE NEWS from the pulpit. Her pastor had just announced that he was planning to resign from his position as senior pastor of Great Neck Community Church, their one-hundred-member Asian American congregation—the latest in a long line of defections that the church had experienced in its ten-year history. Joyce, a thirty-three-year-old Korean-American pediatrician, her husband and fellow physician, Steve, and her toddler son, Justin, had chosen Great Neck largely because they felt warmly welcomed by this pastor; it also helped that there were other biracial families in the church.



But now, having been at the church for nearly two years, they were more aware of its inner workings and attuned to the forces that seemed to cause tension and strife in the congregation. One issue seemed to be a running debate over whether the church should be multiethnic rather than “Asian American.” Another challenge was a continuing level of distrust that always seemed to exist between the lay leaders of the church and the congregation. Yet another challenge was finding a pastor who was able to live up to the high standards demanded by the members of the church, which was exhibited by this latest news. Over time, these issues had resulted in an erosion of





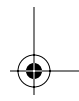
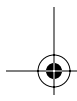
trust and enthusiasm within the congregation, and attendance and membership had slowly been waning. No pastor thus far had been able to manage these and other conflicts within the church, resulting in the revolving door of leaders throughout the church's history.

Joyce was not sure what to do. She and her husband had decided to come back to church after having been away for many years; after Justin was born, they had felt a growing conviction to return to their spiritual roots. Before choosing Great Neck Community Church, they had visited numerous churches, and many of the others seemed either too Caucasian or too Asian for their tastes. But the church's constant leadership and attendance struggles caused her to worry about its future. She looked down at eighteen-month-old Justin, oblivious to the instability swirling around him. In a few years Christian education would be a critical element of what she would need to see in a church, but at the current pace she was not sure how Great Neck Community Church would be able to serve that need. She shared a worried look with Steve, then held her son tight. Would they ever find a church that was both a good fit *and* had the potential to survive?



On the surface it would seem that now is an ideal time to be an Asian American Christian. In addition to the thousands of Asian immigrant churches in America primarily serving the first generation, hundreds of English-speaking Asian American and multiethnic churches have emerged in cities all across America, with multitudes of pastors-to-be in training in key evangelical seminaries. For example, at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in Massachusetts, there was a 129 percent increase in Asian American students between the early 1990s and the early 2000s, a statistic that is reflected in the enrollments of other key evangelical seminaries in the country.

And yet to accept these statistics at face value is to underestimate the complexities facing the Asian American church today. In the 1990s the main metaphor depicting the status of the Asian American church was "Silent Exodus," to explain the vast number of previously churched second-generation





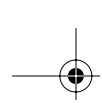
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Asian Americans who never returned to church once they left home for college. Today, these Asian American young people have options to consider because many more churches exist today to serve them than a decade ago. But these churches are not yet in a position to handle all the needs of their existing and potential members and attendees. Instead, the Asian American church finds itself at a critical point of transition—no longer nascent, but still struggling to reach its full potential. Congregations were launched in the late 1990s and early 2000s, largely by young pastors who did not have sufficient role models or support to help them with the daunting task of starting a church, and those congregations that have survived until today continue to experience growing pains from their inauspicious beginnings. Many of these churches struggle with leadership issues, with identifying and pursuing their mission and vision, with staffing problems, with organizational issues—and the list of challenges goes on and on.

As the children and grandchildren of first-generation Asian immigrants have begun to enter into adulthood and forge their own path in this country, so too have the emerging churches that focus on these later generations of largely American-born Asians. In some ways the current status of Asian American churches resembles the growth path of those they seek to serve: these congregations are breaking new ground as they develop their own identity and sense of calling. As these churches struggle with issues of leadership, spiritual maturity and a lack of resources or role models, they find themselves wrestling with the same questions that are often faced by the children of immigrants who are moving from childhood to adulthood: Who are we? What are we becoming? And what does the future hold for us?

“Where there is no vision, the people perish” (Prov 29:18 KJV) is a statement we frequently hear, particularly when going through periods marked by uncertainty and change. During the past two decades, as the Asian American community has faced such significant experiences of transition, pastors and lay leaders have responded by seeking to develop a clear ministry “vision” to lead and guide their congregations. Many leaders, however, have realized that they cannot develop an effective ministry vision in isolation, that





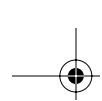
one person or one congregation cannot clearly see the whole picture of what God is doing in our midst and what God's vision is for Asian American congregations.

A wise Christian leader once said that our God rarely shows one individual the whole vision of a given ministry, lest he or she might become prideful. Rather, God usually gives different pieces of that vision to different individuals, encouraging his children to come together to put together the whole picture of the ministry vision he provides. Indeed, when God's people gather to pray, listen and share with others their own pieces of the larger picture, like children working together on a jigsaw puzzle, what emerges is God's vision for the church.

Catalyst Leadership Center (originally named Katalyst) was launched fourteen years ago by a group of concerned Asian American pastors, partly to provide such a vision-making experience for Asian churches in North America. During the 1990s, Catalyst sponsored annual Asian-North American Christian Leadership conferences, bringing together more than five hundred Asian American pastors and lay leaders. In addition, between 1997 and 2001, partnering with seminaries such as Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and Talbot Theological Seminary, Catalyst also offered summer modular courses on Asian American Leadership Formation, inviting current seminarians as well as young pastors to enter into dialogue with more experienced pastoral leaders. Through these programs Catalyst provided a place where established and emerging Asian American Christian leaders could explore together their churches' current experiences and future direction. These events made it clear that our God is indeed powerfully at work among emerging Asian American congregations even as we experience many challenges and growing pains. These interactions also highlighted the need for us to carefully study and record how God is creatively shaping newly emerging Asian American congregations and what his vision might be for our churches, individually and collectively.

Perceiving such a need, Catalyst launched a three-year (2002-2004) leadership forum in which a group of Asian American Christian leaders from di-





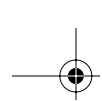
verse ethnic, denominational and gender backgrounds gathered to share with one another their congregational stories and experiences, identifying certain challenges, opportunities and hopes. As the participants shared their congregational stories, what emerged was a clearer and hope-giving picture of what the Asian American church can be and is becoming. This book seeks to capture the vibrant picture of various congregations that emerged during our three-year experience of listening to one another and to our God.

In this book, we will focus on the theme of developing healthy Asian American congregations, exploring both “what we are becoming” and “what we are called to do,” our identity as well as our mission. In doing so, we will use the biblical image of the household of God (Eph 2:19; 1 Tim 3:15; 1 Pet 2:5), an image that has not only deep theological meaning but also rich cultural nuances, particularly for Asian American Christians. So, what does a healthy Asian American household of God look like? What traits and qualities should characterize such a congregation? Indeed, how does a congregation become a healthy household of God?

Recent studies that have examined various congregations in the United States point out that each congregation has two forms of theology that guide and shape them. *Explicit* theology (proclaimed faith) is preached from the pulpit, taught in Sunday school classes and listed on the church’s website as its statement of faith; it is what the congregation confesses as its belief. *Implicit* theology (practiced faith), on the other hand, is what the congregational leaders and members do when they gather together; it is a set of values and norms that guide how they make their decisions, relate to one another and allocate their resources. Studies point out that congregations grow most optimally when their explicit and implicit theologies are congruent with one another and thus reinforce one another. These studies indicate, however, most congregations fail to experience such an agreement between their two operating theologies. Furthermore, these studies find that between the two, implicit theology exerts greater influence in shaping the congregation and its members.

Paying close attention to both explicit and implicit theologies is espe-

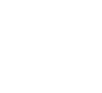


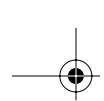


cially critical for today's Asian American churches. On the one hand, given their specific context of ministry, Asian immigrant churches often function as ethnic cultural centers as well as spiritual communities. In such settings, while the church's explicit theology may be shaped by sound reflections on the Scriptures, the congregation's implicit theology can be easily molded by deeply rooted cultural values and norms, even by those elements that counter biblical teachings. On the other hand, as our society becomes more postmodern, the consistency between these two forms of theology becomes even more crucial. Today's young postmoderns, including Asian Americans, are searching and yearning for churches that are authentic and genuine, churches that earnestly seek to practice what they believe.

As we look at many Asian American congregations, we see that most of our congregations uphold biblically sound explicit theology, and we are grateful to our God for enabling these congregations to embrace and proclaim his truth faithfully. However, given our churches' unique relationship with our ethnic cultures, we need to prayerfully and critically examine the implicit theology of our congregations, making sure that what we do together reflects what we believe as God's people. It is our firm conviction that when our congregations' beliefs and actions mirror one another, when our churches are orthodox and engage in orthopraxis, our churches will continue to grow as healthy households of God.

In this book, then, we will explore a number of different Asian American congregations that are intentionally striving to grow as healthy households of God. In doing so we will particularly examine their implicit theology, exploring how their congregational values and practices, informed by their explicit theology, are contributing to the health of their church and the nurturing of their members. It is important to note that these churches were chosen not because they have "arrived," but because they are very intentionally striving to grow in this area of practicing what they believe. Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that this book's aim is not to promote certain models, methods or strategies of ministry. The congregations presented in this book represent different ethnic backgrounds, theological tra-





ditions, geographic regions and are of different sizes; however, one thing they have in common is their strong desire to live out the biblical mandates and values in their own particular contexts of ministry. And as they do so, God's Spirit leads them through unique journeys of growth and transformation, further molding their identities and missions. It is our strong hope that this book will motivate and challenge you, whether you are a pastor, lay leader or a seminarian, to prayerfully think about the role you can play in helping your own congregation grow as a healthy household of God.

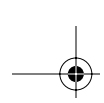
The book is divided into nine chapters, each focusing on a biblically informed value that we believe brings health to Asian American congregations. In discussing these values, each chapter will be framed around three components, *culture*, *gospel* and *leadership*, and it will examine (1) how Asian American culture affects the practice of the given value, both positively and negatively; (2) how the mandate of the gospel adds significance to that value as well as corrects our cultural practice of the value, and (3) how Asian American leaders exercise their leadership in shaping, affirming and practicing that value.

Asian Americans Christians often struggle with "toxic shame" that is largely produced by our cultural practices. In chapter one, "Grace-Filled Households," Nancy Sugikawa and Steve Wong address the question of how Asian American congregations face this issue of shame by living out a life of grace. And what does grace look like in Asian American congregations?

As people of the book, Asian American Christians are very committed to the authority of God's Word. However, given our own unique history, social location and mission field, Asian American congregations are developing different ways of engaging the Bible that allows them to be faithful to the Bible and be relevant to their particular context. In chapter two, "Truth-Embodying Households," Steve Kang addresses the question of how healthy congregations interpret, communicate and apply the Word.

Serving in young emerging churches, many Asian American pastors are facing the challenge of developing leadership principles and methods that might be effective in their context. In chapters three and four, both on





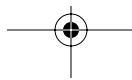
healthy leaders and healthy households, Helen Lee examines the cultural roadblocks, biblical models and healthy practices and values from today's key Asian American church leaders.

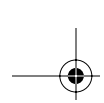
Because many of our churches come from very tradition-bound cultures, continuity and conservation are emphasized. Yet for many emerging Asian American churches, change is inevitable and occurs often. Their ability to demonstrate flexibility in the face of change will greatly enhance their ability to minister effectively in their shifting environments. In chapter five, "Trusting Households: Openness to Change," Jonathan Wu examines what is involved in being open to change in a healthy manner.

For emerging Asian American congregations, evangelism has become more challenging than for Asian immigrant churches, due to cultural factors and forces such as the influence of postmodernism in our society. In chapter six, "Hospitable Households: Evangelism," Helen Lee examines how healthy Asian American congregations approach and practice their evangelism in such a way that they maintain authenticity while demonstrating relevance in our fast-changing world.

In many Asian ethnic congregations the intergenerational relationship between first-generation immigrants and American-born second-generation young people is the major flashpoint of conflict. However, congregations that are multiethnic also wrestle with generational issues as they seek to reach out to those who belong to older generations and to effectively nurture their own children in faith. Chapter seven, "Multigenerational Households," itself written by the intergenerational team of Paul Kim, Peter Cha and Di-han Lee, examines how healthy congregations intentionally nurture generational relationships and partnerships.

Given our Confucian heritage, gender relations in our culture and community are clearly marked by inequality and injustice. In chapter eight, "Gender Relations in Healthy Households," Grace May and Peter Cha explore how healthy Asian congregations choose to affirm women and their gifts, whether they are "complementarian" or "egalitarian" in their theological convictions. They will also demonstrate how the intentional practice of





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this value is critical to the overall health of these congregations.

Largely because of language and cultural barriers, Asian immigrant churches have not been actively involved in the ministry of mercy and justice in their own geographical communities. On the other hand, most English-speaking evangelical Asian American churches have also been inactive in this area, largely due to their conservative theology that discourages the church's social involvement. The churches that are participating in this book project, however, feel that the ministry of mercy and justice is an integral part of the kingdom ministry. In chapter nine, "Households of Mercy and Justice," Soong-Chan Rah will explore why these churches have passion in this area and how they are living out this passion.

It is our hope that all who read this book, whether a current or future church ministry practitioner, will find valuable insights and ideas to challenge, inspire and support their work in the critical mission field of Asian American young people. All the contributors of this book deeply desire to see more healthy Asian American churches start and grow, and we believe that the shared wisdom imparted in *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches* will help further the cause of the kingdom in these ethnic-specific and multiethnic communities.

