

# PREPARING FOR ASIAN AMERICAN CHURCH LEADERSHIP

## *A Supplement to Growing Healthy Asian American Churches*

HELEN LEE

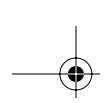


ALTHOUGH GOD WOULD OCCASIONALLY ANOINT the inexperienced leader (such as kings David and Josiah), for many other significant people in the Bible, preministry preparation was critical. God often used the earlier life experiences of leaders to season, test and teach them for the particular role that lay ahead. For Moses, for example, one critical point of preparation was accepting and embracing his cultural heritage in order to lead the Israelites.<sup>1</sup> And although we do not have extensive information on Jesus' life before his public ministry, we do know that he waited to begin his ministry until after he had "[grown] in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Lk 2:52 NIV) and endured his temptation in the desert. The strength Jesus gained from rejecting Satan's temptations no doubt helped prepare him for the most arduous choice he would eventually make: accepting God's will for him to die on the cross. In this case the

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<sup>1</sup>See Paul Tokunaga, *Invitation to Lead* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2003), pp. 110-13.





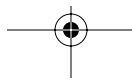
preparation had vital and eternal consequences.

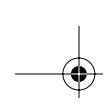
The same holds true for the Asian American men and women who seek to follow God's call into church leadership. The consequence for poor preparation is not just a dysfunctional church or organization. Ultimately the souls of men and women in these households of God are at stake. As a result, no future or potential Asian American church leaders can afford to ignore the importance of strong preparation before beginning their ministry. Good preparation entails strengthening four areas of self-awareness: (1) understanding our own strengths and weaknesses, (2) understanding our relationship with God, (3) understanding our relationships with others and (4) understanding our particular ministry context.

#### UNDERSTANDING OURSELVES

One challenge that all humans face is the ability to see ourselves the way others see us. Our self-perceptions have built in biases and blind spots that often prevent us from being fully aware of both our assets and our liabilities. Current church leaders recommend that future leaders invest time and energy into doing a full assessment of their abilities so that they will be better prepared to choose the ministry context that best fits their gifts. Greg Yee, director of leadership and congregational development for the Pacific Southwest Conference of the Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC), says it is important "to be comfortable with who you are and what you bring, then surround yourself with people who complement you with their ministry skills." As church leaders embrace and acknowledge their weaknesses, rather than erroneously believing they can do everything a ministry requires, Yee feels that they can be much more effective in leading their churches.

But in addition to knowing our abilities, David Gibbons, senior pastor of NewSong Church in Irvine, California, believes that honestly assessing our health in other areas is also just as critical a part of becoming an effective and healthy leader. "There are a lot of people who should not be a pastor," he says. "One reason is that a person could just have a basic character flaw. Yes,

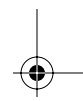
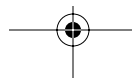
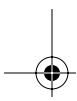
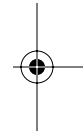


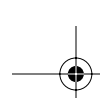


we all have them, but there are people who do not have a healthy understanding of their flaws yet.” Gibbons says that inviting others to help with honest feedback is a key way to help combat blind spots we might have about our weaknesses. “A healthy leader should have experience in healthy small groups, both being a part of one and leading one. They should go through formal assessment centers, whether secular or Christian, to receive an honest evaluation of where they are. And informally, they should ask people for their feedback.”

In terms of asking others for feedback, the leaders of healthy Asian American congregations often solicit the assistance of mentors to provide an honest assessment of their abilities and gifts. Particularly for young leaders or leaders-to-be, choosing a mentor can have a lasting impact and provide invaluable guidance. Soong-Chan Rah, senior pastor of Cambridge Community Fellowship Church (CCFC), made the effort to seek out mentors when he began planting CCFC when he was in his late twenties. He was mentored by several individuals, including a first-generation Korean pastor, African American pastors and Native American pastors, all of whom helped shape his future commitment to multiethnic and justice/mercy ministries. In many cases, Rah feels these were relationships that God ordained and initiated, so he approached these mentors from a posture of humility and prioritized the opportunities to interact with these different individuals. “I need someone to say, ‘Here are some patterns, some good things and some bad, in your leadership,’” he says. “And I would go so far as to say that young pastors should prioritize looking for mentors outside of their ethnic comfort zone. . . . There is much to be learned from these crosscultural relationships, such as ways of relating, doing ministry or worshiping, that we would otherwise not have experienced.”

Gibbons agrees that it is important to be open and creative when looking for potential mentors. “Don’t just look for the one apostle Paul type of person. Don’t just look for the big guns. Some of the best mentors are the saints who are behind the scenes. Look for people both older and younger, and also look outside your immediate network. The white church is really help-





ful in this regard. I would approach a white pastor and say, ‘I want to learn from you. I’ll do whatever it takes.’”

As future Asian American leaders go through the process of assessing their leadership gifts, however, they should be mindful of ruling themselves out as a leader because they do not feel they have classic outward qualities such as charisma, confidence, outspokenness and other characteristics that have traditionally been associated with strong leadership. In fact, Jim Collins’s recent business bestseller *Good to Great* offers the radical idea that the best CEOs actually display quite different qualities than what might be assumed in the marketplace—qualities such as humility, modesty, self-effacement and shyness.

Paul Tokunaga, InterVarsity Christian Fellowship’s Asian American ministry coordinator, picks up on this concept in his book *Invitation to Lead*, noting that the new paradigm Collins is promoting should come as a breath of fresh air for Asian American leaders. “We have been told for decades that given our makeup, disposition, gifting—call it what you like—Asian Americans were not CEO, top dog material. They call us good number crunchers or invaluable second-in-command or consummate team players but the hot seat belongs to guys named Iacocca and Welch,” he writes.<sup>2</sup> Instead, Tokunaga believes that the “Level 5 leader” Collins describes in his book, a person with the dual qualities of personal humility yet professional will, fits well with the Asian American temperament and can serve as an encouragement for potential Asian American church leaders to step forth in faith if called to lead.<sup>3</sup>

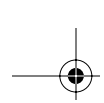
At the same time, Tokunaga and other current leaders of healthy Asian American churches acknowledge that there are particular qualities that today’s Asian American church leaders need to have, especially those who will ultimately become senior or head pastors in their congregations. “Many Asian Americans may be like a Level 5 leader, but churches and organizations are still looking for a figurehead,” says Ken Fong, senior pastor of Ev-

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 143.

<sup>3</sup>See Jim Collins’s book *Good to Great* (New York: HarperBusiness, 2001), pp. 17-40, for more information on the qualities of a Level 5 leader.





ergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles in Rosemead, California. “Yes, Level 5-type leaders can be significant in the twenty-first century, but in some contexts, the senior leader has to be a compelling individual and speaker, and strong vision-caster.” A church’s context will thus be important in helping a potential Asian American leader know whether it will be a good fit for his or her particular gifts and abilities. The key will be for these leaders to know themselves well enough to predict what kind of setting will best help them grow and serve effectively.

#### UNDERSTANDING OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

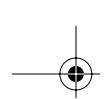
Henri Nouwen writes, “Christian leaders cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus, and they need to find there the source for their words, advice, and guidance.”<sup>4</sup> Although it may seem too obvious a point that Christian leaders must cling firmly and primarily to God for direction and sustenance, for Asian American church leaders who have been encouraged to equate self-identity with performance, encouragement to “be” rather than “do” can be a good reminder. Particularly in the ministry context, when there are always so many things that must be done, the combination of the tyranny of the urgent and the Asian American drive to work hard and succeed can sometimes overshadow the greater importance of being firmly rooted in God and his Word. Grace May, former pastor of Chinese Christian Church of New England (CCCNE) in Brookline, Massachusetts, says, “If I am going to be a good shepherd and counselor, I have to be in the Word and trust that God will minister to them through me. There is nobody that cares for my congregation more than God. Then when I go about my day-to-day work, I’ve got resources to draw from. Otherwise, I’m just talking off the top of my head.”

One area in particular in which Asian American church leaders should closely examine their relationship with God is in the area of understanding

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<sup>4</sup>Henri Nouwen, *In the Name of Jesus* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 31.





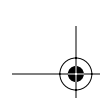
God's grace. Given the heavy emphasis on shame in Asian American culture, a concurrent but equally important counterbalance is to have a healthy and accurate portrait of what God's grace means and looks like in our own lives. Dihan Lee, English ministry pastor at Open Door Presbyterian Church (ODPC) in Herndon, Virginia, says, "A pastor for an Asian American congregation has to reflect an awareness of God's grace, because there has often been such an abuse of grace in the Asian context. It's critical that an Asian American pastor know how to show, receive and minister grace."

How do leaders of healthy Asian American churches find ways to come to a deeper comprehension of God's grace? For Evergreen Baptist Church-LA's Fong, a turning point came when in 1991 he began to minister to drug addicts at the Asian American Drug Abuse Program (AADAP) in the inner city of Los Angeles. Through this ministry, he regularly met with people "who used to intimidate me—former prostitutes, the homeless, abusers of all kinds of drugs and alcohol." But he found that these were people who were able to accept their status as hopeless sinners better than most people in Asian American culture, "where the emphasis is often on looking perfect and together! My dope fiend friends, as they like to call themselves, have been God's instrument in my life, taking me to the greater depths of the grace of the gospel of God."

Fong discovered early in his ministry at AADAP that the distance between himself and those whom he was counseling was smaller than he first realized. As he addressed the addicts at one of his early AADAP sessions, he said:

I'd be lying to you if I said I hadn't a clue what it was like to be an addict. To struggle in weakness and need with certain temptations and sins. To know the momentary euphoria of their pseudo-comforting powers. To berate myself incessantly for succumbing to sin again. To go for long stretches of time where I was clean and sober, only to set myself up for a relapse because I had convinced myself that I no longer had a problem. So I want you to know that I'm an





addict too. I'm addicted to sin, and I can't break sin's hold on me without God's help.

As a result of his ministry at AADAP, Fong has taken strides to emphasize God's grace with his Asian American congregation, as he wants for them to similarly enjoy a Christian walk where they can truly comprehend the power of God's unconditional love and acceptance. "I want so much for all the people at our church to know this love that surpasses knowledge, to know it in all its amazing dimensions. And the only way I know how to experience it is to admit what a mess I am, with or without Jesus. But at least with Jesus, there's Someone I trust to clean up my messes."

#### UNDERSTANDING OUR RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHERS

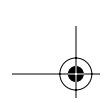
Not only do leaders of healthy congregations take time to understand themselves and their relationship with God, but they exhibit healthy relationships with other people and with the world around them. The quality of their external relationships can often serve as a barometer for how they are doing in understanding themselves and their relationship with God. The challenge is that maintaining high-quality relationships is not always given as much consideration as accomplishments in other areas. Nouwen writes, "The temptation of power is greatest when intimacy is a threat. Much Christian leadership is exercised by people who do not know how to develop healthy, intimate relationships and have opted for power and control instead. Many Christian empire-builders have been people unable to give and receive love."<sup>5</sup>

And yet some would argue that the most important aspect of being a church leader is the capacity to love and care for the people in their congregation. The relational gifts required to be the leader of a healthy church are not merely a good idea but, in fact, the model of ministry presented by Jesus himself. George Cladis writes, "God did not send a committee or an organization to die on the cross for us. God sent the Son who loves us,

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 60.





teaches us, rebukes us, redeems us, and empowers us—all very relational dynamics!”<sup>6</sup>

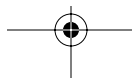
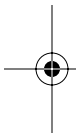
Leaders of healthy churches have practiced the skills of relationship building in their own lives, which translates into positive relationships in the church setting. NewSong’s Gibbons believes that a key sign of an effective and healthy Asian American leader is that they exhibit healthy relationships. “I will look at the significant others in their life. If they have problems with their spouse or, if unmarried, with their parents, that is a red flag. I will also look at their chemistry with other teams they have worked with. I want to see if there is any sense of pride within their character. Others will say of a healthy leader that they are a good listener, they respect people, and their relationships are blameless and real.”

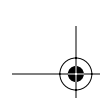
ODPC’s Lee notes that many Asian Americans may not have had experiences with pastors who have exhibited strong relationships. “People today are looking for pastors who are relationally whole. They have encountered so many dysfunctional pastors or they’ve experienced so much dysfunction in their home life.” As a result, church leaders who spend time working on their relationships will be able to serve as a significant model for those within their congregations, and can help their people better understand what it means to have healthy relationships in their lives.

Leaders of healthy Asian American churches not only care about those within the walls of their congregation but also extend their concern to people in their communities and the world. “It’s important for today’s leaders to have a worldview,” says Gibbons. “The mission to love your neighbor means to love someone different from you, culturally and socially.” (See chapter six on evangelism in *Growing Healthy Asian American Churches* for additional examples of leaders who intentionally push beyond the boundaries of their own comfort zone and who encourage their congregations to do the same.)

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<sup>6</sup>George Cladis, *Leading the Team-Based Church* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1999), p. 25.





### UNDERSTANDING OUR MINISTRY CONTEXT

Leaders of the healthy Asian American churches represented in this book became associated with their respective ministries in a variety of ways. Some planted a church; others joined an existing church or church plant. But in all cases, these leaders went through a process of discernment and evaluation to ensure that the ministry context was a good match for their gifts and temperaments. Then once the decision was made and the call accepted, they stayed true to the call, demonstrating perseverance until a time when God leads them elsewhere. The dual process of thoroughly researching the ministry and committing to it has helped these leaders develop their congregations into healthy households of God, in some cases over the course of not just years but decades.

The general consensus among the leaders interviewed for this book was that it takes a special individual to be able to start a church immediately after graduating from seminary.<sup>7</sup> CCFC's Rah, who planted the church soon after his time in seminary, says, "I planted CCFC when I was in my late twenties. What was I thinking? I started too early. What twenty-eight-year-old should be a senior pastor?" For Rah, what made the difference is that he spent time seeking out older and more experienced mentors to help him along the way, but even so, he is not sure he would repeat the experience.

ECC's Yee works with church planters in his denomination, and he be-

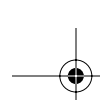
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<sup>7</sup>One area of need that was often cited by the leaders interviewed for this book is the lack of formal education or models to serve the specific issues that Asian American pastors will face. "Western seminaries are in the pioneering stages of understanding Asian American ministry and what's needed," says IVCF's Tokunaga. "And if you're starting an Asian American church as a pastor, there are very few models you can use. It's just not possible to use a Willow Creek or Saddleback model verbatim."

CCFC's Rah agrees. "I value my seminary education, as it gave me a theological framework and language. But I was frustrated with the first semester of seminary because it felt like the content was coming through an ultra-conservative, ultra-Western European perspective. So in terms of my education in multiethnicity, almost none came from seminary."

So prospective Asian American pastors may need to keep in mind that as they pursue their M.Div. degrees they should seek out other forms of education to help prepare them for what they'll experience overseeing an ethnic, bicultural or multiethnic church. Rah, for example, intentionally sought out African American mentors and took additional courses in urban ministry at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary. "Seminary is the starting point of your education, not the ending point," he says.





believes “there is a very small minority of folks who graduate from seminary and who are ready to take on a solo ministry. There is a lot of status in someone calling you as the solo pastor, and the package is much juicier. For many people, this is the fruit of three years of seminary. But it’s naive. Someone just out of seminary does not have the leadership base to lead. An internship is not enough experience before taking on a church plant.”

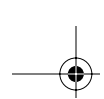
But neither is it a simple matter for young pastors to find their first pastoral assignment in an existing congregation. They must take the time to understand the church, the other pastors on staff and the members within the church as a critical part of the decision-making process. Given the limited number of strong Asian American churches in the United States, there is no guarantee that a young Asian American pastor who wants to continue in Asian American or multiethnic ministry will be able to find a ministry setting that fully aligns with his or her personal preferences. However, current leaders suggest that basing a decision merely on the ethnicity of the church is too limited. “I tell people to find the best situation regardless of ethnicity, where the senior pastor is someone you feel will really train your voice,” says Evergreen Baptist Church-LA’s Fong.

Fong also says that young leaders need to be careful to find a ministry setting where they will be able to utilize their gifts and learn from the other pastors. “You really need to have enough moxie to interview the potential mentor. You need to figure out if you’re going to just be treated as cheap labor. Will you be invited to staff meetings? How honest is the lead pastor in sharing his or her own second thoughts or mistakes?”

Another critical aspect of finding the right ministry context is assessing the potential chemistry with the other staff members. Ultimately the health of a congregation will only be as strong as the health of its leaders, so for everyone involved, good chemistry among the staff is extremely important. Paul Kim, senior pastor of ODPC, says that “chemistry is something that is hard to put into a formula. But you will know it when you are at the church if it’s there. Both the pastor and the church must seriously, prayerfully go through the process.”

If the chemistry is right, and the choice of ministry context has been





made with significant thought and prayer, the foundation is set for a positive experience for a young pastoral leader. But even so, challenges and setbacks will occur, and up-and-coming leaders need to be prepared for that reality. Current leaders know from experience how important stability and longevity are to the long-term health of a congregation. Jonathan Wu, executive pastor for Evergreen Baptist Church-LA, says, “A church’s quality of life is affected if there is constant turnover among the staff. It is impressive to see a church where there are associates and senior pastors that are passing the five- or ten-year mark. It means they have figured out how to work with one another on a common base of ministry.”

It also means that during the difficult times, those pastors have committed to working out differences and persevering through the challenges rather than leaving. “Ministry requires a long-term perspective,” says Paul Kim. “It requires self-discipline. Young leaders need to learn how to persevere, and it will build their character.”

Grace May feels that her position as a female senior pastor has helped prepare her to develop a long-term perspective toward her job rather than a short-term one. “If you are an evangelical woman in a pastoral position, it means you have probably spent ten to fifteen years figuring this issue out and that you are sure, biblically, theologically and personally, that this is your calling. So you are not likely to quit after the first year of ministry. You’re doing it for the right reasons. Even so, you will have challenges; I have struggled with whether to leave every year. But now I know, having worked through those hard times, that I am not budging until God tells me to leave.”

Healthy Asian American congregations stem from healthy leaders who have gone through the necessary preparation to bring them to their place of calling. Ken Fong labored for many years at Evergreen as an associate pastor before being called to be a senior pastor. Others, like Soong-Chan Rah, found themselves leading a start-up church before the age of thirty. But all can attest to the importance of understanding themselves, their relationship with God, their relationships with other people and their ministry contexts in helping to prepare them for their respective callings.

