

April 2023

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Claire (2023) "Diversity in the American Church: A Case Focus on the Korean Immigrant Church," *Global Tides*: Vol. 17, Article 6.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.pepperdine.edu/globaltides/vol17/iss1/6>

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Cover Page Footnote

Acknowledgement: Thank you to my mom and dad for teaching me that the most important character is love. Thank you to my sister for always inspiring me. Thank you, Dr. Soper, for giving me the permission to write this paper and for being an intellectual role model. Thank you to Grace Ministries International for being a safe place for my first-generation parents and my second-generation self to encounter the love of God and receive the gift of the gospel in America. Thank you to Tapestry for teaching me what a Jesus-loving community looks like. Thank you to Pepperdine for allowing me to live well and learn so much. Thank you to Nathan Rim for editing this paper and for being an encouraging friend. Thank you to 4ChristMission for allowing me to understand the joy of sharing the gospel. Thank you God for loving me so deeply and for giving me the opportunity to write and share this paper.

Diversity in the American Church: A Case Study on the Korean Immigrant Church

Introduction: Ethnic Enclaves in American Churches

Why do ethnically segregated churches exist in America if the Christian Gospel is equally meant to be shared with people from all backgrounds? A quintessential theme that one can extract from the Christian Gospel (particularly in the New Testament scriptures) is the belief that ethnic backgrounds should not stand as a social barrier under the unity of the New Testament gospel. Hence, many Christian traditions emphasize the exegesis of Galatians 3:28: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Yet, in many North American churches, there still seems to be some form of ethnic segregation, whether intentional or not. Moreover, it appears that each ethnic faction is marked by some set of theological or cultural features that distinguish it from other factions. From a sociological perspective, the Black Church upholds distinct cultural trademarks like a powerful gospel choir and social justice advocacy (Weekes, 2005). Native Churches pray and commune within their tribal reservations. Korean American Christians host gatherings with Korean food, hymns, and early morning prayer. Each community has a unique cultural flair in the way they practice particular teachings in the Bible. While America has slowly progressed away from segregation on the institutional and social level, ethnic enclaves—particularly within the Christian religion—remain. This paper aims not to critique such ethnically homogeneous Christian communities; rather, it aims to explore the socio-political history, function, and future direction of ethnically homogeneous Christian communities in America. I specifically analyze the origins of the ties between the Korean immigrant population and Protestant Christianity, the importance of the Korean Immigrant Church (KIC), and demographic changes of the KIC in the 21st Century.

The Unique Knot Between Korean Americans and Protestant Christianity

61%—a dominating majority—of Korean Americans living in the United States identify as Protestant Christians (Connor 2014). The Korean American demographic comprises first-generation immigrants (people born in Korea who immigrated to America) as well as second-generation, third-generation, and following generations (people born and raised by each preceding generation in America). Given that most Korean American adults were immigrants from South Korea when this poll was conducted, one would expect the majority of South Korean natives also to be Protestant Christian. However, a low 19.7% of natives in South Korea identify as Protestant Christian (CIA 2021). So, if Korea’s indigenous religious demographic does not provide a clear correlation or context for the overwhelming association between Korean Americans and Christianity, then what does?

Perhaps the answer to this question can be better found in the historical context of Korean *immigrants* rather than Korean natives. Understanding this connection will enable a better comprehension of the origin and current state of the KIC. Furthermore, the reactionary changes analyzed in the KIC may apply to the broader diversity of Asian American churches in America (discussed in the second to last section) due to the similar immigration trends and treatment of Asian Americans on both legal and social levels.

Initial Threads Between Korean Americans and Protestant Christianity

Horace Allen was the first American missionary to enter the Korean peninsula in 1884.

Other early American missionaries such as Horace Grant Underwood and Mary Scranton established missionary schools and hospitals—now Yonsei University and Ewha University—in Korea to share the Christian gospel through such institutions. With these efforts, the Christian faith spread rapidly across the peninsula, with many converting to the faith (though many Koreans continued to practice indigenous religions such as Confucianism and Buddhism). A century later, when the first wave of Korean immigrants arrived in the U.S. starting in the early 1900s, many were recruited through Christian social institutions to become plantation workers in Hawaii. More than half of the first Korean plantation-laborer immigrants in 1903 were recruited directly from the Naeri Methodist Church in Korea by U.S. diplomat and Presbyterian missionary Horace Allen (Chung n.d.). The tie between Christianity and Korean culture also manifested in political developments. For example, during the Japanese rule over Korea between 1910-1945, the “Western influence” of Christian theology empowered virtues of equality and liberty. These encompassing theological values served as a moral and political impetus for many Korean natives to push back against Japanese authority during the Korean Independence Movement (Deede 2010).

Due to high levels of political unrest and instability during this period of Korean history, many Koreans immigrated to America to study at universities, including Boston University, Columbia, Harvard, and Princeton (Chung 2010). American missionaries had an active role in recruiting such students from Korea and sending them to the United States in hopes of spreading Christianity (Pak 2020). As one scholar states, Korean Christians—more Westernized than Koreans of other religious affiliations—were more likely to immigrate to America than non-religious or other religiously affiliated Koreans during the post-1965, third wave of immigration (Kim and Min 1992). In fact, 52.6% of immigrants from Korea were reported to be Christians during the third wave of immigration (Kim and Min 1992). Other factors—including socio-economic opportunities, family ties, and political insecurity—also brought many Korean immigrants to America.

The intertwined history of Korean immigrants and the Christian community remains impactful to this day. The children of many of the third-wave immigrants currently compose the second-generation Korean American demographic. In 2019, roughly 1.9 million “Korean-identified individuals” were living in America (Budiman 2021). There were 4,454 Korean immigrant churches recorded in America as of January 2018 (Jang 2018). In proportion, there stands one KIC for roughly every 430 Korean-identifying individuals in America. KICs expanded immensely during the third wave of immigration, providing a familiar community for Korean immigrants.

Functional Role and Importance of the KIC

The KIC not only provided a spiritual home for many Korean immigrants but also created a cultural community that was difficult to find elsewhere. “Church was a safe haven. It was a place where you could feel so at home,” said Joon Lee, Associate Pastor of Grace Ministries International in Fullerton and a member of the 1.5 Korean American generation. The KIC was a place of both spiritual and cultural-social community, where Korean immigrants could listen to sermons and engage in small groups in the Korean language while sharing Korean food during gatherings and fellowship. According to a journal published by the Hastings Race and Poverty Law Journal, “Some churches even provided social aid, legal aid, and English language classes. Being a part of a church was a way to establish community in a new land. It was an opportunity to create a new ethnic identity with comrades reminiscent of the homeland.”

When early third-wave Korean immigrants were still moving to America, Korean culture

was not as popular as it was in the 2020s. There were not many local Korean grocery stores or popular Korean restaurants like there are today in places such as Los Angeles. Steve Chang—former Executive Director for the Asian Pacific American Dispute Resolution Center—explained how L.A.’s K-Town initially had only a couple of Korean businesses in the area, and many Korean immigrants did not yet have a place to find a Korean cultural refuge outside of their home. The exception to this lack of communal cultural spaces for Korean immigrants was the KIC. Professor of Sociology at Pepperdine University, Rebecca Kim, explains the value of ethnic ties in a community. She states in her book, *God’s New Whiz Kids?: Korean American Evangelicals on Campus*, “Ethnic ties are extensions of kinship affinities, and ethnic alliances form because they advance the interests of those who are thought to have common descent.” Kim also shares the role of the ethnic-spiritual community. She explains that Korean immigrants who did not consider themselves Christians could still find community within KICs since Christian churches were always looking to take care of new members.

The KIC also helped immigrants overcome barriers including moving to America and finding a community in a foreign land. Chang stated during a personal interview, “To make that journey to come across an ocean [...], you had to sell everything in order to even be able to afford to establish something on the other side [...] If someone you know from your church in South Korea went over and they’re in a church in L.A.—when you go there—you can lift them up and they can help you. That sense of connection really lowered the barrier a bit in terms of the fear factor of going to another place.”

Once this initial pattern of immigration was streamlined by a substantial number of Korean immigrants, many more were able to follow the same path at an exponential rate through chain migration. Immigration data confirms this growth pattern since 1965, the year the Immigration and Naturalization Act replaced the national quota system for Asian immigrants.

While there were less than 5,000 immigrants from 1965 until the late 1960s, there were over 30,000 annual immigrants in 1975 and over 35,000 in the mid-1980s (Min n.d.). Early families that immigrated to America started church communities, and when new Korean immigrants arrived in America, many of them could join these churches via strong family or relational connections. Chang explained how Korean immigrants found their way to churches through these personal relationships. He stated, “A lot of times, the person who picks you up at the airport—whether that’s your relative or a close friend or some kind of connection—would show you how to survive in America and you end up kind of doing some of the similar things that they do. And so, part of that meant also joining the church that they are participating in.” Lee also recognizes the church’s active role in helping Korean Americans immigrate and assimilate into America, “[The KIC] became a place where people offered one another jobs and their small businesses. I know of many stories of pastors back then always picking up people from the airport—new immigrants, people they never met before. But they would offer that, and these people would naturally become part of their congregation, some of whom were Christians, but many of them never even went to church their whole lives.” During these years, when there was a massive influx of Korean immigrants to the U.S., the KIC played a valuable role in forming a welcoming space for first-generation immigrants to find community.

Demographic and Cultural Shifts in the KIC

While the tight-knit community of first and second-generation Korean American families continued through the church’s social activities, such as church-sponsored sports tournaments

and big picnics, cultural conflicts regarding ideas of diversity and the role of the church emerged as the intergenerational span of Korean Americans expanded. Although the KIC was once a cultural and spiritual haven for the first-generation Korean Americans, the fabric of this phenomenon began to transform with the generations that followed. The 1.5-generation–Korean immigrants who came to America as young children with their families—either continued the ethnic homogeneity of the KIC or branched out into a new church that welcomed cultural diversity. As part of the 1.5 Korean American generation himself, Chang explained that many in the 1.5 generation did not find the ethnic-religious enclave welcoming to those who felt more connected to and assimilated with American culture. Many KICs also understood that the younger generations of Korean Americans would assimilate into America by making friends outside of the Korean American demographic while also being fully fluent in the English language. As a result, many KICs created distinct English Ministries separate from the Korean Ministry within the same church building. For example, one room in a KIC would have a Sunday service with the sermon and worship held entirely in the Korean language; in contrast, another room would have a separate service fully conducted in English with an English-speaking pastor and worship songs from American Christian bands.

The separation between the Korean and English Ministry within many KICs demonstrates a clear divide in the cultural norms and patterns between the first generation and the generations that follow. While first-generation immigrants developed their social identity and community deeply within their ethnic-spiritual enclave, this is less so for the younger generations, especially for those who linguistically identify more with English than with Korean.

Since the 1960s, America has undergone massive social reform to break apart racism and ethnic segregation. During the Civil Rights Movement, many Christians were at the forefront of breaking down segregation as the Black Church mobilized and networked mass numbers of church members to protest peacefully. In recent years, particularly in 2020, America experienced a reopening of unaddressed and suppressed wounds in racial and ethnic relations. As racial pains continue to be addressed (especially within the first-generation immigrant community who suffered the most from acts of racism and discrimination), America will continue to move toward a less racially segregated society. With the increase of U.S.-born Korean Americans (e.g., second-generation and the generations that follow) and the mending of race relations on institutional and societal levels, will KICs continue to grow or dwindle? The lower numbers of immigrants from Korea and the passing away of elderly demographics are expected to cause a decrease in KICs. According to the Migration Policy Institute, the Korean immigrant population peaked in 2010 and has been decreasing since. As South Korean economic and political conditions have improved, there are also fewer incentives to immigrate to the United States. On the contrary, the number of KICs has increased despite the decrease in immigration. The 4,454 KICs recorded in 2018 is an increase of 221 more churches from the 4,233 KICs recorded in 2013 (Jang 2018). Although KICs have been increasing, there has also been an increase in the number of “sister-churches.” Such “sister churches” have typically been pioneered by the 1.5 and second-generation, and such sister churches tend to be more closely connected to American culture than KICs. KCM, a para-church ministry on college campuses, originally began as Korean Campus Ministry; in the summer of 2021, however, the ministry officially changed its name to stand for Kristos Christian Ministry. The change in its name reflects not only the growing membership of non-Koreans in the organization, but also the shifting attitudes of the organization’s racial inclusivity.

Currently, the intergenerational span—the number of generations within an ethnic group—of Korean Americans is relatively small. As a second-generation Korean American who grew up in Southern California, I find that most Korean Americans I interact with tend to be

either a first or second-generation (or a member of the 1.5 generation). Since there is no official record of such data, I am relying upon my own experiences and social interactions, which certainly have their biases. However, being a part of a national Korean American organization as well as a Korean American network of Christians across the country, I've connected with a large pool of Korean-Americans from throughout the United States. During such an early phase of the Korean American's intergenerational span, there is a need for ethnic-specific, religious communities. Such ethnic-specific communities provide a safe space for individuals to learn theology and grow as a community.

Conclusion: Application of the KIC to the Broader American Church

There is a strong incentive for Christians from any racial background to care about the changes in Asian American churches. Asians are the fastest-growing racial and ethnic group in America, from roughly 10.5 million to 18.9 million people between 2000 and 2019 (Budiman and Ruiz 2021). Korean immigrants are the tenth-largest immigrant population in the United States and are the fifth-largest immigrant group from Asia (Batalova and Esterline 2022).

The generational shifts in KICs may be found in other Asian-American, Christian communities, such as the Chinese American Church and Vietnamese American Church. Similar to the generational divide on the sense of cultural identity and belonging amongst the Korean American community, a PEW study shows a comparable generational difference amongst the Asian American demographic. While only 30% of first-generation Asian Americans report feeling like a "typical American," 65% of American-born Asian Americans share this sentiment (Pew 2012). This generational shift shows the difference in attitudes towards feeling "American," which may have broader implications on inclusivity and ethnic enclaves.

Although changes in the KIC may generally concur with generational shifts in other Asian American churches due to similar institutional policies toward Asian immigrants in American history, this trend differs for other races. For example, the Black Church has a historically intricate and longer intergenerational span in America. Native Americans who generally stay connected within their tribal communities also have a complex history between faith, identity, and cross-ethnic relations. The Latino community in America started with a historically strong connection to the Catholic faith and an increased tie to the Protestant faith in recent years (Winter 2021). Each enclave has its own unique history between religion and ethnic affiliation.

One of the beauties of America is its ethnic diversity. People from a plethora of ethnic origins identify as American citizens, and the American church is also a representation of such diversity. Since immigrant churches begin as ethnically homogenous, will they remain as ethnic enclaves or not? Will the loosening of ethnic homogeneity weaken immigrant churches in America by dissolving potent cultural flairs and social-cultural cohesion? Or, will the decline of ethnically homogeneous churches and the growth of ethnically-pluralistic churches increase greater unity within the body of Christ? While the threads of ethnic-specific Christian communities continue to weave together, only God knows what the final tapestry of churches in America will be.

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