

**SERVANTS IN A NEW LAND:
ASIAN AMERICAN UNITED METHODISTS TELL THEIR STORY**

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In 1987 The General Commission on Archives and History of The United Methodist Church sponsored the taping of interviews with 101 Asian American United Methodists as a part of the Women's and Ethnic History Project. Conducted by Professor of Chinese History Dr. Key Ray Chong, these interviews included men and women who, at the time of the interviews, served the church as pastors, professors, district superintendents, bishops, diaconal ministers, members of the General Boards of Global Ministries and Discipleship, annual conference personnel, representatives from various Asian caucuses, and leaders of United Methodist Women and The Commission on the Status and Role of Women.

The format of the interviews was fairly consistent. Dr. Chong began each interview by asking the interviewee his or her date of birth, place of birth, family background, educational background, pastoral appointments or work experience, and the name of the church or board he or she was serving. After this introductory material, Dr. Chong continued the interview along one of two tracks. For pastors, Dr. Chong asked the pastor about such things as the church's membership, church attendance, problems or conflicts within the church, annual budget, giving patterns, programming, management style, sermon style, achievements and disappointments in the parish, and advice to new pastors. There was also ample opportunity for other topics to be discussed such as the distinctive cultural or generational characteristics of each Asian group. For annual conference, caucus, or denominational board personnel, Dr. Chong covered the same introductory material and then asked the interviewee about his or her work, especially significant contributions and challenges.

There is not sufficient space in this brief overview to recount each interview. For this purpose, The General Commission on Archives and History has available a catalog of the tapes which identifies each participant and lists the main subject matter of each of the conversations.¹ The audiocassette tapes of the interviews are housed in the archives of The United Methodist Church and may be used at the Archives and History Center on the campus of Drew University in Madison, New Jersey. However, to whet the appetite of the reader interested in Asian American

¹Ask for the "Asian American United Methodists Interviewed by Dr. Key Ray Chong: A Catalog of the Audiocassettes" compiled by Edward C. Zaragoza.

United Methodist concerns, a few reoccurring themes in the interviews are worth highlighting.

Strangers in a New Land

Being a servant in a new land is not an easy task. Howard G. Chua-Eoan, writing for *Time* magazine, recently made these remarks about Asians in America:

Even as they stake their claims to the American West, Asians are encountering problems: racism, the ambivalence of assimilation, the perils of prosperity, ethnic jealousies and sometimes dire inequities of a laissez-faire society. Asians in general are still strangers in the Western paradise, and they are keenly aware of their status.²

This predicament of Asians being strangers in a new land has a long history, is characterized by struggle, and has left some scars. Not until recently have Asians been welcomed into the United States. In 1882 the Chinese Exclusion Act kept Chinese immigrants from legally landing on our shores. All Asian immigration was restricted in 1924. Only in 1968 were Asians allowed freely to enter our borders. By the 1980s, Asians made up 42% of all legal immigrants into the United States.³ The first great waves were from China and Japan. More recently, the pattern has changed and Asian immigrants are coming from Korea and Southeast Asia.⁴

In his introduction to *Churches Aflame: Asian Americans and United Methodism*, Artemio R. Guillermo characterizes the Asian American experience as one of struggle. Facing racism, discrimination, and bigotry, Guillermo describes the relationship between Asian Americans and The United Methodist Church this way:

If there is one word that would best describe the development of our Asian American United Methodist churches, it would be 'struggle.' In my view this word summarizes the birthing, dramatic lives, and triumph against all odds of these fledgling churches in an often hostile environment.⁵

In order to fight racism, discrimination, and bigotry collectively, Asian American United Methodists met in Chicago in 1975 to form the National Federation of Asian American United Methodists (NFAAUM). Its first executive director, Jonah J. Chang, served until 1985. In his taped interview, Chang listed the priorities of the federation as inclusiveness, visibility, unity within diversity, and advocacy for Asian Americans at the annual conference, jurisdiction, and general conference levels of The United Methodist Church. While seeking a voice within the denomination, the wide diversity

²Howard G. Chua-Eoan, "Strangers in Paradise" *Time* (April 9, 1990), 33.

³Information regarding immigration laws and population statistics are from Kenneth C. W. Kammeyer, George Ritzer, Norman R. Yetman, *Sociology: Experiencing Changing Societies*, 5th edition, Economy version (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1992), 306.

⁴Kammeyer, 329.

⁵*Churches Aflame: Asian Americans and United Methodism*, edited by Artemio R. Guillermo, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991. This book is highly recommended reading as a companion to the recorded interviews of Asian American United Methodists.

of culture, language, and practices among the many Asian American United Methodists represented by the federation presented the federation with many challenges, especially the task of consensus building.

Dr. Daniel B. Lee summarized the tensions which exist among Asian Americans and which make consensus often difficult to achieve. Asian Americans, he pointed out during his interview, were often wrongly identified from without as one ethnic group, when in fact they were very diverse and at different stages of assimilation. This erroneous identification contributed to stereotyping and misperceptions. Asians were often seen by outsiders as high achievers, very well-educated, and economic successes. From within, Asian Americans were not always ready and willing for inter-ethnic dialogue because their traditions, history and practices were different.

However, the creation of NFAAUM was a hopeful sign. Chang's successor to the post of executive director was Naomi Southard. She identified a new set of priorities and projects. Among them were congregational development within the Asian community, concerns of Asian-American women, and support and continuing education for Asian clergy, especially clergywomen. Southard, like Chang, expressed concern about tensions among Asian American groups, but she also noted that a consensus could be built upon the foundation of the common history Asians share as Americans.

There have been other important associations created by interviewees to battle racism and promote Asian American concerns. Artemio Guillermo contributed to the establishment of the National Federation of Filipino United Methodists in the 1980s. Peter Yoon K. Sun worked to form the National Association of Korean American United Methodists. This association was to strive for the creation of 500 new congregations, with a membership of 100,000 new individuals, by the end of the century. Joseph C. W. Lee was hard at work with the congregational development program unit of The General Board of Global Ministries where he specifically dealt with building programs and pastoral leadership.

Along with the history and struggle of Asian Americans to become full partners both in the church and in their new homeland have come some deep scars. Four Japanese American interviewees discussed the painful experience of the *Nisei* "relocation camps" during World War II and their enduring legacy of shame, hardship, and bigotry. Speaking from personal experience at a camp in Colorado, Victor T. Fujiu told how the *Nisei* (second generation Japanese Americans) maintained their loyalty to the United States even while held in the camps. Minoru Kanagaki was incarcerated in a camp in Utah, Lester Suzuki in Colorado, and Lloyd Wake in Arizona. Wake spoke poignantly about the "mixed feelings" of Japanese Americans in the camps. Like Fujiu's experience, few protested, but went along with the "relocation" out of loyalty. But the encampments only served to fuel anti-Japanese sentiment both during and after the War.

Cultural Identity

Another prominent theme in the interviews was the importance of keeping one's culture in America. This concern was expressed in two ways. First, there was the ever-present threat of "Americanization," of gradually losing one's cultural identity with each succeeding generation due to the pervasive influence of American values. Second, interviewees did not see a distinct cultural identity as an obstacle to living a good Christian life; they saw it as a prerequisite. One representative of the first way is Grant Hagiya who described third generation Japanese Americans (*Sanseis*) as being totally "Americanized" or out of touch with their own cultural roots. He also noted, however, that the same folks were not totally assimilated, that is, they had not become a part of American culture due to continuing racism. This might happen over a long period of time if inter-racial marriages continued.

The phenomenon of "Americanization" led to family (and congregational) tensions and conflicts when "American born" Asians no longer shared the values of their parents and grandparents. First generation Koreans, according to Hae Jong Kim, maintained the Korean language and culture as did Japanese *Iseis*. Their value system emphasized the family, the collective over the individual. Like Japanese *Niseis*, second generation Koreans adopted American values which asserted the rights of the individual and which created a conflict within the individual between freedom and responsibility. Paul J. Kim called attention to the plight of senior citizen Koreans who had been left behind by their grown up children. Into these generational conflicts, both pastors injected the "1.5" Korean, the individual who was "in between" cultures. The "1.5" Korean could sometimes be a bridge between generations or they could themselves be left out altogether.

David J. Harada discussed what he called "ethnic theology," that the Gospel became flesh in a cultural setting. Describing St. Paul as a *Nisei* (second generation) Christian, Harada urged the proclamation of Christ, not by upholding the dominant culture (Western) while denigrating the other (in this case, Japanese), but by using elements of ethnic backgrounds to proclaim the Good News. One example he used was the commandment to honor one's parents. This imperative could be expressed in the Buddhist practice of respecting one's ancestors.

Women and the Church

Asian American churchwomen were confronted with discrimination on two fronts. As Asians, they suffered the evil of racism. As women, they endured the evil of sexism. At the time of her interview in 1987, Kiyoko Kasai Fujiu was a General Secretary of The Commission on Status and Role of Women (COSROW) and the only Asian American at the General Secretary level of the church. An advocate for the full participation

of Asian American women and racial/ethnic peoples in general, Fujiu stressed her faith and experience that God worked through all peoples, not just white males. From this foundation, she encouraged women and men of color to be active in and beyond the local church.

One example of an Asian American laywoman in action was Kum Hwa Lee. In Maine, she was an active participant in United Methodist Women, training lay leaders in mission at what she called "the homespun level," the local level.

Nancy S. Yamasaki was an ordained minister. She experienced discrimination both from the wider world of white, western America and from Asian congregations as well as from Asian male clergy. For her, racism was linked with sexism and together became a powerful determinant of how well Asian American clergywomen performed. Both dynamics left Asian American clergywomen isolated and without support. And when alone and without aid, Asian American clergywomen, argued Yamasaki, found their energy more easily dissipated and their efforts at achieving excellence thwarted. Her experience and sadness were echoed by two other interviewed clergywomen, Mamie Ming Yan Ko and Nam Ok Lee.

From Strangers to Servants in a New Land

These servants in a new land have told their story to Dr. Chong and they continue to tell it to us, sometimes in a very personal way, sometimes at a distance. These servants have often spoken of a desire to balance their new home and culture with their old, to resolve the tensions among first, second and third generations, and to heal the lingering scars from the past which continue to shape the present. Represented in these interviews were Asian American United Methodists, literally from Maine to California to Hawaii. Each one has told a story and made a contribution to the work of Christ in the world through Asian American involvement in The United Methodist Church. The collection of Asian American United Methodist interviews recorded by The Commission on Archives and History is an invaluable source of knowledge and inspiration for the church as it moves into the 21st century. Told in their own words, the stories of these men and women, remind us all of the words of Jesus Christ, "Well done, good and faithful servant" (Matt. 25:21 RSV).