

FIVE CRIES OF ASIAN AMERICAN CHRISTIAN YOUNG ADULTS

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{Slide 2} Why are we concerned about this topic?

If you are part of an immigrant population that is not growing, then it makes sense to be concerned about **passing on the legacy** of your ministry. You don't want your church or denomination to die. You don't want your work to be erased or turned into a historical footnote. So you need to convince English-speaking Asian Americans that they should inherit your legacy.

Others, perhaps, would not care about sustaining a legacy. These leaders would be more interested in extending the gospel to "**new missionary markets.**" Our churches can become even more transnational and reach the Chinese, Korean, Filipinos, etc., in the Asian diaspora. We can even become more multi-cultural in the U.S. and reach Mexican, Caucasian, and African American people. English-speaking Asian Americans should join us in expanding our missionary markets.

Of course, the reality is that the families in our churches would not be happy if we don't minister to children and youth effectively. Legacy and new markets are not what dads and moms in our churches usually care about, is that not right? They are more concerned about being part of a church where there are healthy relationships, a positive environment to nurture faith, and a place to cultivate successful living. In other words, there is a desire for a **harmonious family**.

But all three concerns - legacy, missionary markets, and harmonious families – are about how to persuade Asian American Christian young adults to stay in or join our churches. They are about mobilizing the energy and resources of young adults, but not about caring for the young adults themselves.

The ability of our church and ministry leaders to demonstrate genuine care for young adults is the most important first step to building intergenerational bridges. We need to pay attention to their concerns. So in this presentation, I highlight five "cries" of Asian American Christian Young Adults. Much of this presentation is based on current sociological research and may not all apply to your situation. That's why I encourage you to engage your own ministry deeply and reflect on the young adults in your churches and communities.

{S3} Terminology and resources:

I'd like to make clear that this workshop is not about youth or teenagers. It is about young adults. In the social science literature some terms such as "Generation Next," "Millennials," and "Emerging Adults" are used to describe adults between the ages of 18 and 30 (and as late as age 35). There has been an increasing interest in understanding how the religious characteristics of this generation in the United States have changed over the last decade. Many "emergent" Asian American Christians share similar characteristics, though there are some differences, too.

One very helpful resource is called “Changing Sea: The changing spirituality of emerging adult project” <http://www.changingsea.org/> I recommend it highly for those who would like a general overview. I’ve also included a list of references at the end of this paper.

{S4-S5} On-line survey of Asian American young adults

18 responded to an on-line survey that I conducted November 2010. This is not a scientific survey, but some of the quotes illustrate what many Asian American young adults are thinking about.

- My voice/opinion does not count
- I need to be a confident person at work and standing up for myself - to not let people treat me like I'm a teenager since I look young
- Low expectation by church leaders towards young adults, and having the tendency to be marginalized
- I want “the freedom to be listened to, really listened to, about my concerns about my ministry and future by caring Christian leaders

So what are the five cries of Asian American Christian young adults?

{S6} 1. WHEN WILL I GROW UP? [DELAYED ESTABLISHMENT OF ADULTHOOD]

A couple of responses to the Asian American survey: “Stuck” “My generation is lost, or passed over” The first cry, “When will I grow up” is a reflection of three factors that impact “emergent adults” today:

1. The Risk Economy: “The risk economy is characterized by a reduction in both the generosity and stability of wages and benefits compared with previous generations.” “Workers in the risk economy, especially lower-skilled males, are less likely to have stable, lifetime employment, and men and women are increasingly likely to work into their later years. Wages and benefits have changed, too. Shrinking health-care coverage and rising costs have left many Americans uninsured or underinsured, individual retirement accounts have largely replaced pensions, and reduced wages and lower investment returns have reduced household incomes. Despite the steady growth in the percentage of income that wives contribute toward the family coffers, gaps between the rich and poor have grown more and more acute. In this environment, workers may be fearful about finding and keeping a job, and even if they have a job, they may not be able to make ends meet.”

2. Changing Workplace Expectations: “Today’s emerging adults were raised to be confident and hopeful, goal oriented, civic-minded, and egalitarian.” “Remember that they are used to structured environments, so they need leaders who provide that structure as well as challenges. They are used to being connected and like to work in teams. They want work to be fun, and they expect deadlines and the organization of work to be flexible. They expect to be treated with respect. They

want to use technology (and to be in environments that are technologically savvy). They do not have much patience with inequalities in the workplace (or the classroom, church, or civic organization) based on gender, race, or sexual orientation.” (Penny Edgell, 2)

Robert Wuthnow: “**tinkerers**” “capturing their flexibility, self-motivation, creativity, egalitarianism, pragmatism, resiliency, and short-term focus.” “census data show that the average American worker today will hold seven or eight jobs between the ages of 18 and 35 (25% of emerging adults will have more than 10 jobs). Wuthnow gives an example that illustrates the meaning of these changes. A chemistry major who graduated in 1970 would have joined DuPont or a similar employer right out of college and had a career with that company. Now she is likely to hedge her bets by getting experience in writing or marketing, and perhaps working for a start-up or two and a nonprofit, and then maybe (or maybe not) a major company like DuPont. At some point she may well switch to something else that draws on her experience but is in a different sector, perhaps becoming a technical writer, a teacher, or a consultant. She is likely to view this as normal and be confident about her ability to negotiate each change as it arises. But this is an example of a thriving trajectory; others do not fare so well.” (Penny Edgell, 2)

3. Forever Children Syndrome: This is the inability of many Asian American immigrant church leaders to view English speaking Asian Americans as adults. Rarely is an American-born or raised pastor called to be a senior pastor in these churches. Furthermore, their elders or board members tend to reinforce this idea in decision-making and budgetary priorities. In churches where the English speakers are equal or stronger, there is very little sense of “family” with Asian language members

{S7} Impact: Delayed “adulthood”

“Emerging adults today take longer to establish themselves in a stable job or career, and taking on paid employment has become decoupled from a set of other transitions that used to be bundled together and occur shortly after leaving school: marriage, establishment of an independent household, and the birth of children.”

“When economic sufficiency becomes more difficult to achieve, the rest of the transition to adulthood is also affected. For earlier generations, a bundle of five life-course transitions tended to occur together: completing high school (or college, for the fortunate), getting married, finding full-time employment, establishing an independent household, and having children. For women, motherhood often, but not always, meant exit from the labor force. By the early to mid-20s, the transition to having one’s own independent household and nuclear family was complete. But today entry into adulthood is gradual, ambiguous, and complex. In 1960, 77% of women and 65% of men had completed all of these major life transitions by the age of 30. In 2000, only 46% of women and 31% of men had completed all these transitions by the age of 30; emerging adulthood is a new life stage that does not end until the mid-30s. Furthermore, many Americans do not achieve all the

traditional adult markers until they are 40, and quite a few never do, remaining single or childless throughout adulthood.”

Pathways through the risk economy:

“According to sociologist Robert Wuthnow, the age at which most emerging adults achieve economic sufficiency is not only changing, but also lagging behind expectations. He cites poll data showing that most Americans believe that young people should be employed full time by age 21 and be able to support a family by age 25. Today’s emerging adults largely share these aspirations, but they are unable to reach these goals until their late 20s or early 30s. The inability to meet economic expectations has resulted in changing residential patterns and relationships with parents. About one third of adults between 18 and 34 receive substantial financial help from their parents in any given year, and rising numbers continue to live with their parents and delay establishing their own household.”

Three pathways to reaching adulthood:

1. Teamwork strategy (1/3 of young adults follow this pathway): Complete college, get married (or form long-term stable relationships), delay childbearing until late 20s or early 30s. Often receives substantial help from parents. “They avoid the responsibilities of child-rearing until both partners have established themselves in a “good” job with benefits and have begun accumulating assets. By their mid-30s, the teamwork group have established careers and have paid down their debt (or avoided debt in the first place). They are buying homes and have begun to save for retirement. Some will remain childless, but the majority will begin having children once long-term security is in sight.” (8)
2. Flying solo strategy (1/3):
3. Not equipped – always at risk (1/3).

Impact of delayed “adulthood” on Asian Americans?

- *Exodus to Promised Land of adulthood:* Many seek to find churches where they can grow and learn how to lead. But this does not happen often. There is a “cost” to being an “adult” in mainstream America – to deny or repress one’s ethnic or cultural background.
- *Resignation to perpetual dependency:* Many never grow up in immigrant OR mainstream churches. This is fixable if either churches recognize the importance of treating and expecting “emergent” Asian Americans to be responsible adults.

{S8} 2. CAN I EMBRACE MY RACE?

Some quotes from the survey: “not fitting in with white culture,” “not being Chinese enough for my immigrant friends”

The American race script is the problem

“If it ain’t white, it ain’t right”: even though times have changed, the reality for all Americans is that “whiteness” sets the standards for our understanding of what is good, beautiful, or superior. That’s why wealthier and educated Asian immigrants

prefer to move into white suburbs and have their children compete with white students. That's why Asian American worship sing praise songs written and performed by white artists rather than Black gospel. This is called a racial script and all Americans are trained (consciously or not) to play their role in it. Sure, there are many alternative scripts, but these rarely play in the mainstream.

White man's multiculturalism vs. biblical multiculturalism: This is another part of the race script that evangelicals uncritically embrace. I used the term "white man's multiculturalism" to be provocative, but what I really mean is the hidden color-blindness even among those who promote multiculturalism. A church or organization may call itself multi-ethnic, but if its core leadership and vision ignores the history and experiences of its various constituents, it is not true multiculturalism. Biblically, neither Jesus nor Paul ever envisioned the erasure of Jewish or Gentile ethnic identities in their vision for the God's reign or for the Church. At Pentecost, there was no insistence that the church use only one language. Though we should heed the warning against excessive nationalism or identity politics, that is a secondary concern (both biblically and in today's American context). The greater threat is making America, the American dream, and American whiteness our default standard – all of which is a more real idolatry than affirming our diversity.

Gnostics among us: Why do evangelicals prefer a colorblind multiculturalism? In part, it comes from the presence of Gnostic thinking in our churches. As J. Kameron Carter suggests in his very important study entitled *Race: A Theological Account*, modern Christian theology and popular culture assumes a "hierarchy of anthropological essences and the supremacy of those of a pneumatic nature within the hierarchy." Anything rooted in history and race are considered inferior to the spiritual realm. Carter suggests that this tendency is more akin to Gnostic desire to repudiate the Jewish roots of Christianity in favor of a spiritualized Christ. Indeed, by Orientalizing the Jewish Jesus, the Gnostic strategy was to establish a hierarchy of spiritual elites. Thus began what Carter calls "a discourse of death, the death of material existence." This is how racial ideology in the West was born. Gnostic thinking is very pervasive among evangelicals today when we think about race and culture. It is one of the reasons why many evangelicals are so quick to embrace a post-racial vision. Cameron hopes that modern Christianity in its theological and institutional expressions can be liberated from racial ideology. But in order to do so, we need to reject Gnostic ways of thinking.

{S9} Writing a new script where we belong:

Given the racial script in American society and in our churches, is it any wonder why emergent Asian Americans have difficulty embracing their race? Is it any wonder why we define and see ourselves from the lens of whiteness rather than our own experienced reality? Is it any wonder why we are so ambivalent about immigrant Asians?

There are two challenges for emergent Asian American Christians:

- *Representation.* How can we “represent” ourselves in mainstream America and in the Global Church? Rather, how can we represent ourselves without uncritically reinforcing the racial script? Emergent Asian American Christians need to (and should be supported by older Christians) represent themselves in two senses: (1) fair participation in organizational leadership of both mainstream and immigrant churches and through (2) making an Asian American Christian culture through creative engagement with our history, cultures, and experiences. In other words, emergent Asian American Christians need to learn how to engage political empowerment and material expression.
- *Post-post-racial Asian American Christian leaders.* Furthermore, we need to raise up a new generation of Asian American leaders who can articulate more than a post-racial perspective. By this, I mean two things: First, that Asian American Christian leaders who are now heard by and respected by the wider Christian community must represent Asian Americans. They should not skirt the question of their identity and legacy as Asian Americans in order to appeal to a wider audience. They also must not reproduce the racial script that misrepresents Asian Americans. Second, every organization that trains future leaders (e.g., seminaries) must address both the importance of ministry to racial diversity as well as value ministry to ethnic specific congregations. Too many emergent Asian American seminarians or leaders-in-training are taught either that their racial identity does not matter or that only multi-ethnic ministries matter. Asian American Christians (both immigrant and next generation) must strongly encourage training institutions and their own churches to pay attention to this issue.

{S10} 3. AM I LOVED? [FRIENDSHIP AND MARRIAGE]

One response to the survey was an honest question: “How can I find a Christian mate?” Indeed, Asian cultural assumptions about marriage and family as well as the realities of American cultural understanding about intimacy impact emergent Asian American Christians.

Asian American Friendship Networks: “European American emerging adults’ friendship networks become more diverse (especially if they are exposed to more diverse social networks through college or work), but the networks of African American, Latino American, and Asian American emerging adults become less diverse (especially if they invest in activities and groups linked to their ethnicity).”

Singleness

“For the first time in history, the majority of emerging adults (those 18 to 29 years old) are not themselves married with children and are not surrounded by others who have made that life transition.”

{S11} Most churches are still using 1950s approach to family ministry:

“programming for children and teens and for mother (and sometimes, now, for fathers). Programs for singles are relatively rare and most are oriented toward

singlehood as a short-term status and focused on helping the single person to find a suitable Christian spouse.” (4)

Wuthnow: “emerging adults today face a 10- to 15-year period in which religious institutions, by and large, do not offer meaningful ministries oriented to facilitating their longer and messier transition into adult establishment. And there are few ministries relevant to those who may plan on a longer-term period of singleness or childlessness and view this as a normal part of adult life. Among younger Americans (those under 45), unmarried adults are less likely to attend church than are their married counterparts today—but they are also less likely to attend church than their counterparts (single young adults) did a generation ago. And there are many more unmarried adults today than a generation ago. Changing family formation patterns explain most of the increase in the percentage of young adults who are not religiously involved.” (4)

Expressions of Love: Traditional Asian vs. Contemporary American? Are these factors (friendship networks, singleness, and Asian culture) reasons why many emergent Asian American Christians look for love in other places?

Challenge: Can Asian American churches address the need for intimacy, love, and respect within their congregations?

{S12} 4. AM I BEING FED AT MY CHURCH?

Survey quote: “I’m expected to teach the children and youth, but I’m not being fed spiritually.”

What does it mean to be fed spiritually? The perception of many emergent Asian American Christians is that the immigrant church is too performance and obligation oriented, and lacking in grace and in substantial spiritual resources.

Indeed, the focus on doing, serving, and building has resulted in the construction of many impressive immigrant churches and ministries. But English-speaking Asian Americans seem less impressed with this. Why?

{S13} American religion today is therapeutic:

“Some religious groups have emphasized strong boundaries and doctrinal rigor, but by and large, the overall tenor of American religiosity has been a kind of pragmatic moralism, or what sociologist Nancy Ammerman calls “Golden Rule Christianity.” In a famous study of Muncie, Indiana (or “Middletown”), sociologist Theodore Caplow found a pragmatic “common creed” religiosity that emphasized the importance of **treating others well, of believing in heaven and that good people go there when they die, of prayer and good works.** Today’s emerging adults very much share this pragmatic, nondoctrinal, and moralistic approach to religion, with one additional dimension.” The “therapeutic orientation, a sense that religious involvement is a good thing to do if it makes you feel good about yourself or if it expresses an important part of your individual (not group-based) identity—

spiritually speaking, if it feels good, do it.” Christian Smith: “moralistic therapeutic deism”

“This approach to religious commitment is not something that today’s emerging adults invented. **They learned it from their parents** or from religious institutions that were shaped by their parents’ Baby Boom generation. Baby Boomers largely rejected an understanding of religious involvement as a moral obligation or part of one’s obligation to one’s community. Boomers are religious “seekers” who have adopted a range of spiritual practices and transformed religious institutions to fit with their lives.” (Edgell, Faith and Spirituality... 3)

{S14} Distant from organized religion today

Distance from Organized religion	Emerging Adults	Other Adults
Attend church weekly or more	15% (20 plus) 30% (30 plus)	40% (older adults)
Not members of a church	35%	19% (all adults)
Belong to no religious tradition	20%	14% (all adults)
“Secular” or “somewhat secular”	23%	15% (ages 25-64) 10% (over 64)

{S15} Comparing Church attendance (1970s and today)

Church attendance of Americans under 45	1970s	Today
Attend weekly or more	31%	25%
Never attend	14%	20%

- Spiritual, but not religious.

SIDE NOTE:

Will they come back after they are married and start to have children? Not clear since being unaffiliated is now “taken for granted” by so many.

Christian Smith’s Six types of spirituality:

1. Committed traditionalists (15%): strong identity, know doctrine, practice regular prayers, layleadership
2. Selective adherents (30%): adopt some beliefs and practices, reject others.

3. Spiritually open (15%): not religiously committed, but open to religious faith and practice.

4. Religiously indifferent or religiously disconnected (30%): don't know, don't care

6. Irreligious (10%): secular and critical of religion.

“When they do choose to become involved in organized religion, emerging adults are understood, by some scholars, as the driving force behind the development of new forms of worship and religious organization. Some point to new kinds of congregations, for example, “emergent church” congregations that are consciously postmodern, eclectic, and organized in a nonhierarchical way. Others point to the fact that emerging adults are more comfortable with multiculturalism and value diversity; studies of congregations that resemble a racial/ethnic mosaic find that they are, largely, young congregations. Still others wonder whether the megachurch phenomenon is driven in part by emerging adults wanting to “plug in” to large and multipurpose communities with modern music and aesthetics. But it is too soon to know whether any of these trends constitute a movement toward a new kind of emerging adult spirituality or religious practice.” (6)

Why this matters?

Christian Smith: “contemporary cultural crisis of knowledge and value” (p. 292) the majority of emergents think truth is relative or unknowable; despite increasing tolerance of diversity, their culture has failed them – “lacking in conviction or direction,” lacking in “larger visions of what is true and real and good, in both the private and the public realms” (p. 294)

Jeffrey Arnett – more developmental. This is just a phase. Normal for individualist approach - “a period of exploration and self-focus is a necessary step on the way to adult autonomy” No crisis of values. “Rather, there is a long period of healthy exploration and the forging of new, generationally appropriate norms regarding relationships, consumption, and the like.” (7)

Robert Wutnow: crisis is not with young adults, but with the institutions “which have been slow to acknowledge and adapt to the changing realities young adults face.” (7)

All agree that religious involvement is positive. “Christian Smith argues that young adults today, compared to earlier generations, show increased consumerism and materialism and a higher tolerance of alcohol use, drug use, and casual sexual encounters. He believes those trends are caused by reduced religious involvement.” (8)

{S16} The Asian American question:

- Who feeds me? Asian or non-Asian Christian leaders? Why do many emergent Asian American prefer Tim Keller, John Piper, or John MacArthur? More doctrinal substance and certainty than their churches have to offer?
- Does Asian American history and experience feed me? Why or why not?
- Can immigrant congregations offer a more therapeutic spirituality or more substantial theology?

{S18} 5. AM I GETTING THE BEST VALUE? [CONSUMER CHRISTIANITY]

What % of the following churches are Asians who left Asian immigrant churches?

- Redeemer Presbyterian Church (New York): 50%?
- City Church (San Francisco): 45%?
- Abundant Life Christian Fellowship (Mountain View): 20%?
- First Presbyterian Church (Berkeley): 45%?

{S19} Lisa Sun-Hee Park, *Consuming Citizenship: Children of Asian Immigrant Entrepreneurs* (Stanford University Press, 2005)

- Why do “second generation Asian Americans feel compelled to remind others of their legitimate existence in the United States.”
- They “exert *social citizenship* through *consumption*.”

{S20} Model Minority Christianity?

- Why do English speaking Asian American Christians feel compelled to remind others that they are “legitimate Christians”?
- •Do they exert “spiritual citizenship” through a consumer faith?
- •Consumption: shop, buy, use - but don’t produce, create, participate, lead

{S21} Is it the parents’ fault?

Do parents in our churches create consumer-oriented emergents?

- Best high school
- Best college
- Best careers
- Best spouses and families
- Best churches? [not Asian American churches, according to the American racial script]

{S22} Summary of the Five Cries

1. When will I grow up?
2. Can I embrace my race?
3. Am I loved?
4. Am I being fed at my church?
5. Am I getting the best value?

This presentation explored what I consider five important questions that emergent Asian American Christians are raising to the Church today. These questions challenge the Church to respond in a loving and caring manner. How can both the immigrant Asian, pan-Asian, multi-ethnic, and mainstream American church address emergent Asian American concerns in a manner that respects and affirms what they bring?

But these questions are double-edged because they are also directed to the young adults themselves. Do emergent Asian Americans desire to break free from the racial script that encourages them to be passive “model minorities”? Are they willing to face their own anti-Asian discriminatory attitudes and actions that are shaped by America’s racial script? Do they want to become disciples and leaders who challenge this script?

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Five Cries of Asian American Christian Young Adults

Breakout Session Discussion Starters

Plenary Session #1: Timothy Tseng [ISAAC & Canaan Taiwanese Christian Church]
The greatest challenge facing Asian American churches today is reaching and growing Young Adults who are healthy disciples of Jesus Christ. Often seen as the "Model Minority," Asian American Young Adults appear to lack nothing. But a closer look at who Asian American Young Adults are reveals some great areas of needs that are often neglected by Church leaders and Christian communities. This session will identify five of the greatest needs that Asian American Young Adults have and will recommend practical ways to address them.

1. INTRODUCTIONS [10 minutes]

Choose a note keeper. Please introduce yourselves to one another (Which church are you a member of? How many young adults [ages 18-35] are active members of your church?)

2. OBSERVATIONS [15 minutes]

- a. Which of Tim Tseng's points resonated with your observations of young adults in your church? Which did not?
- b. What have you seen or experienced about Asian American Christian young adults that were not addressed in the presentation?

3. ANALYSIS [15 minutes]

- a. Which of the above observations are impossible for your church to address? Why?
- b. Which of the above observations can your church respond to? How?
- c. What changes in your church's culture or structure are necessary to adequately engage and attract Asian American Christian young adults?

4. SUMMARIZING [5 minutes]

Have each member of the breakout group share one issue that is the highest priority for bridging immigrant and young adult generations based on this plenary and discussion. Use one word or a very short phrase to summarize that issue.

5. PRAY and RETURN TO PLENARY SESSION FOR WRAP UP [5 minutes]

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