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COVER STORY

Why the Children of Immigrants Are Returning to Their Religious Roots

Many second- and third-generation Americans leave the ethnic congregations of their parents for white-led churches, only to come back.

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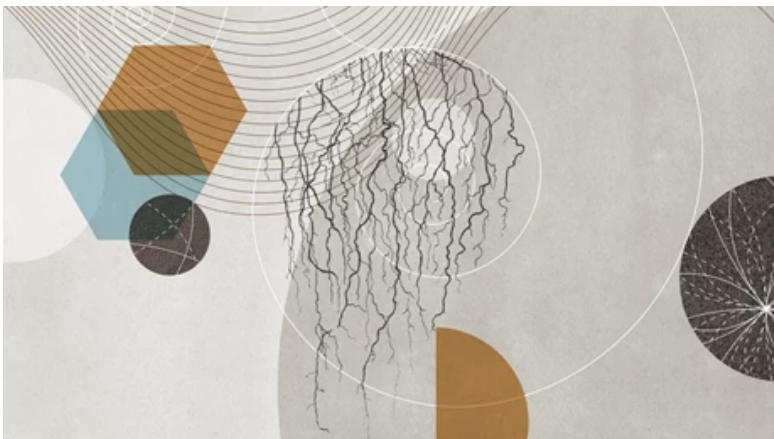


Image: Illustration by Chad Hagen

Read the rest of our March coverage of multicultural churches: Korie Little Edwards looks at how far [the movement](#) has come and how far it has to go, and Michael J. Rhodes unpacks [prejudice in the early Corinthian church](#).

Evelyn Perez tried to share her trauma. Five years ago, she met every week with a small group of women—whom she calls “great people”—at her large nondenominational church in the San Francisco Bay Area. She told the group of mostly white women, plus two other women of color, that her marriage had grown dangerous. The relationship was breaking down, and her husband was physically and emotionally abusive.

But she did not feel fully understood.

“As I shared my story, it was more like, ‘Oh, we’re so sorry you’re going through that, let’s just pray for you,’” says Perez, who is 37 now and divorced. “And it was never a deeper concern of ‘We want to be that neighbor.

We want to sit with you in the pain. We want to walk with you.’ ”



Image: Courtesy of Evelyn Perez

“This is our family. This is our culture. I don’t want you guys to ever lose it.” Evelyn Perez

Perez, who had come with her mother from Guatemala to the United States when she was two, didn’t feel that they understood how, in her experience, her husband’s Mexican heritage led to a manifestation of “you know, alcohol and machismo” that wended its way into their marriage.

Though they were empathetic, the group did not recognize why and how deeply she hurt.

“There wasn’t the willingness of wanting to have a deeper understanding of who I was, where I came from,” she says. “What was my culture? It was never asked.”

So she left. Though she resisted at first, Perez took herself back to Maranatha Covenant Church in Richmond, California, the majority-immigrant church where she had grown up.

She found a dramatically different reception there.

When Perez shared the trauma of her marriage, “they supported me, they came alongside me,” she says. “They were like family. I could see the difference in both churches. There was just a deep understanding, and I felt safe to share my story.”

Perez's story of belonging at a majority-ethnic church echoes those of other second- and third-generation Americans who feel disillusioned by large, white-led multiethnic churches. It's a phenomenon these Christians are wrestling with even as the number of multiracial megachurches increases. A [new study](#) by sociologists Warren Bird and Scott Thumma found that though 58 percent of megachurches are now multiracial—defined as 20 percent or more of a congregation belonging to a racial minority group—94 percent of the senior pastors are white.

It's a seminal time for these children and grandchildren of immigrants. Made up largely of Asian Americans and Latinos, they constitute America's fastest-growing minority populations, due in part to the passage the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, which barred a quota system based on national origin and led to rapid growth in the number of immigrants coming from non-European nations. Largely Gen Xers and millennials, the descendants of post-1965 immigrants have often experienced an ethnic church in their youth and moved on to white-led multiethnic churches, where they found something lacking.

Now, as they raise their own children, many are pondering the type of faith and cultural environment they want to bestow on their kids. That often means a search for churches that will incorporate their stories, embrace their heritage, and hire leaders who look like them.

This shift has led many second- and third-generation Americans away from white-led multiethnic churches and toward multiple alternative paths. One is a type of modified boomerang effect, in which these Christians return to ethnic churches similar to the ones in which they were raised—albeit often with more progressive, justice-oriented expressions of what it means to follow Jesus.

Michael O. Emerson, the Christian sociologist who two decades ago co-wrote the pivotal book *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, says Christians of color also broadly follow two other paths when disaffected by white-led multiethnic churches: They join multiracial churches led by pastors of color, or they drop out of religious spaces altogether.

Sandra Maria Van Opstal, who worked for years with InterVarsity Christian Fellowship and is co-founder of the nonprofit Chasing Justice, says many Christians of color have begun to reject white-led multiethnic spaces because they feel they're being pushed out by a lack of cultural understanding and care.

Van Opstal, whose mother is from Colombia and whose father is from Argentina, grew up attending a Spanish-speaking Catholic parish and says she was awakened to Christian faith at a predominantly white Southern Baptist church. Later, she chose to pastor at Grace and Peace Church in Chicago's Hermosa neighborhood. Though she is no longer on staff there, she still considers Grace and Peace, which is majority Puerto Rican and black, her home church.

“I went to Grace and Peace because I was like, ‘I just need to be away from whiteness for a hot minute if I’m going to survive,’ ” she says, describing it as a healing process. “I wanted to be in my mother’s home. And I think that’s the image that a lot of people of color have. It’s like, my mom’s house is not perfect, but it’s my mother’s home, you know?”

Recent research has supported the notion that large, multiracial churches with largely white pastoral leadership can unintentionally pressure worshipers to conform to culturally white behaviors. Emerson says multiracial churches typically become diverse because people of color move into white churches and not the other way around; further, he says, white people [begin leaving](#) multiracial churches once they become less than 50 percent white.

“The vision is grand, and the vision is biblical: We are to come together to be unified, to be reconciled,” says Emerson, who is white. “The reality on the ground is that those who have traditionally had the most influence—white folks—continue to do so, and so the issues that matter, the issues that are discussed, are the issues that are what white folks care about. The result is, of course, that most folks of color are starting to feel like, ‘Do we matter? Do we really belong?’ ”

Emerson, who heads the sociology department of the University of Illinois at Chicago, analyzes this disillusionment in a new book scheduled for release this year, *The Grand Betrayal*, which he describes as “about white Christians in the US constantly and continually choosing whiteness over brothers and sisters in Christ.”

While conducting research, Emerson and his team asked Christian leaders of color what would help remedy disillusionment among people of color in white-led multiracial churches. He says, “Their answer was consistent, and I think profound, and that is: Notice the problem with the term ‘white-led multiracial church.’ How is that even possible? So the answer is there *can’t* be white-led multiracial churches. And that doesn’t mean there aren’t white leaders. It means there has to be what they call ‘power sharing.’ It has to be a multiracial team. No church is led by just one person. There’s always a board, there are deacons, there’s a leadership team, whatever it is. It has to be diverse. And it has to be diverse not just in appearance but in actual perspectives.”

Bridge builders in the pews

The differences in generational ethnic diversity can be easy to miss if church leaders do not have eyes to see.

Durmomo Gary, who works in church engagement and case management for World Relief, knows well how second- and third-generation Americans are both rooted in the culture of their parents and integrated into mainstream American culture. Born in what is now South Sudan, Gary recalls how the teenagers who attended a Sudanese church he pastored in Illinois for about five years had little interest in attending the immigrant-heavy Sunday service but showed up consistently for a young adult Bible study on Sunday afternoons.

“The music we played (at services) didn’t speak to them; the songs we sang, they don’t know how to sing it; the language we used, they don’t understand it well,” he says. “It is more safe for them to come to the Bible study because I’m doing things in a way that speaks to them. They’re cracking jokes, they’re bringing their Bibles. And the problem with that group is, if they reached a point where they don’t have a church receiving them, they would just walk away from faith.”

Gary points to one such effort at majority-white Calvary Church in Orland Park, Illinois, which created space for the community's growing second- and third-generation Arab American population by launching an English- and Arabic-language ministry called Noor (*light* in Arabic), which is led by an Arab American pastor, Lawrence Haddad.

"So (Haddad) invited me to go to a huge room, and there were 150 to 200 people," Gary says. "I could not hear anybody speaking Arabic. They were in their 30s, 40s, 20s, and they would not fit into the fabric of the regular white American church," but neither were they necessarily interested in an Arabic-only church service.

Sam George, director of the Global Diaspora Institute at Wheaton College, says it's critical for churches to uplift second- and third-generation Christians because their abilities to bridge cultures make them missional forces.

"They carry out a unique function in the mission of God," says George, who was born in India's Andaman Islands. "In the larger canvas, you see God bringing people to this shore, and the subsequent generation rises up, reestablishes and reclaims faith, and reinvigorates and regenerates faith in new ways."

Seeking roots

Both white Christians and Christians of color have long lamented the racial segmentation of American churches, invoking Martin Luther King Jr.'s line about America's "most segregated hour." The maddening challenge for even the most determined multiethnic congregations, however, is that some Christians say multiracial communities are simply uncomfortable and emotionally draining, and so their faith thrives more in culturally homogenous spaces.

Daniel Lee, 35, who was born in the Cleveland suburbs to immigrant parents from Busan, South Korea, speaks of the cycle he's experienced of going from Korean churches to white-led churches and back again.

"This is how I got stuck at Willow," says Lee, referring to Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago. "I was serving at a Korean church and then, after three years, got totally burnt out and left the Korean church. And I hid at Willow, just flying under the radar, didn't want to get involved, anything like that, just attend services."

Eventually, he did emerge, even working at Willow for a few years. "But then I realized my cup wasn't being filled with the community of believers," Lee says. "I think that's the narrative of a lot of ethnic people: They go to a church, a megachurch, to hide out, can't find community, and then they leave. And then what they often end up doing is going back to an ethnic church because that's what they've become accustomed to. Those roots run pretty deep."

Lee now pastors the youth and English ministries of Naperville Korean First Presbyterian Church. He says when he's teaching and drops a few Korean phrases or references certain foods, it's "a connection point for the students."

Some children of immigrants, like Tanya and Barry Jeong, never left the ethnic church. Both were born in Chicago, Tanya to parents from Hong Kong and Barry to parents from China's Guangdong province, and both attended Chinese Christian Union Church, or CCUC, in Chicago's Chinatown as kids. Unlike several of their friends, the Jeongs stayed, making sure their daughters, ages eight and ten, experience the community's unique mosaic of Cantonese, Mandarin, and English languages and cultures.

Even though Tanya, 39, says they could "easily go to a white-led church" because "we would fit in perfectly," they make the 30-minute drive to CCUC because "there's something about being in an ethnic church and being around other Chinese people that you don't have to explain. I feel like when you go to a multiethnic church, you're constantly explaining things or holding back, or you're very conscious that you kind of represent your culture."



Image: Courtesy of Daniel Lee

"I think that's the narrative of a lot of ethnic people: They go to a church, a megachurch, to hide out, can't find community, and then they leave." Daniel Lee

At CCUC, Tanya says, her children can eat dim sum in context. "People don't get grossed out by the fact that one of my kids' favorite foods is chicken feet. They don't feel self-conscious about those kinds of cultural things, which I think sometimes makes it easier for them to open up."

Barry Jeong, 41, adds that because most of his daughters' friends from school and their Chicago suburb are white, going to an ethnic church helps them "see they're of Chinese descent and learn to be proud of that and not want to whitewash themselves to fit in."

In California, Evelyn Perez says even though she was initially reluctant to return to a majority-immigrant church—“I just thought I was too good to go back,” she says—she’s grateful to be raising her sons in a faith community that integrates the language, food, and sensibilities of Latino culture. Her sons, ages eight and 11, were losing interest in Spanish before; now they’re excited to speak it at church, sometimes with their friends.

“I love that, for me, going back was like, ‘This is our family. This is our culture. I don’t want you guys to ever lose it,’” Perez says. “Like, at our churches, how do we raise money? We sell tamales.”

Community has become deeper and more authentic for her and her kids. “We sit with each other,” says Perez. “It’s not like, ‘Oh, hey! How are you?’ No. It’s ‘Come over. Come have some *pan con café*.’ That’s how we do fellowship. We really care for each other, and I’m glad my kids get to see that.”

Like many millennials, Perez, who serves on the church’s leadership team, also views herself as someone with the tools and passion to point out systemic inequities and advocate for social change.

“As a church leader, I’m like, ‘Well, it looks like there was a huge disparity between the Latino immigrant community here and white people,’” she says. What can the church do to help close income gaps? Health care gaps? Educational gaps? “I think it’s so important for us to be able to understand who we’re serving.”

A graft, not a bouquet

Mitch Kim, who was born in California to immigrant parents and was raised largely in Japan before returning to America for college, has experienced a few iterations of church communities as a second-generation Korean American Christian.

He attended and worked at Korean West Alliance Church in Warrenville, Illinois, for nearly two decades. Ten years ago, with the blessing of Korean West Alliance, Kim planted Living Water Alliance Church in Wheaton, Illinois, a congregation of mostly second- and third-generation Americans that flourished and had a call to reach people living “between” cultures.

Then, seven years ago, a district superintendent of the Christian and Missionary Alliance asked Kim if Living Water would be interested in merging with Blanchard Alliance Church, a largely white church whose attendance had begun dropping. At first Kim thought, “Why would I want to tie the albatross of this larger congregation around our neck?” he says. “But I then wondered, ‘Is this sort of the answer to our prayer? Is God calling us together?’ ”

And so began Wellspring Alliance Church. At the time of the merger, leaders at the two churches said both congregations would need to bend. But those at Blanchard thought their congregation would have a bigger adjustment adapting to a senior pastor of color.

What happened, though, was the opposite. “What we found after the merger is that a lot of our people who came from Living Water, they kind of felt like they lost their home, they lost their own space,” Kim says. “We

had a lot of great relationships, but there was a sense where, ‘We have lost something. We have lost a place where we don’t have to explain ourselves.’ ”

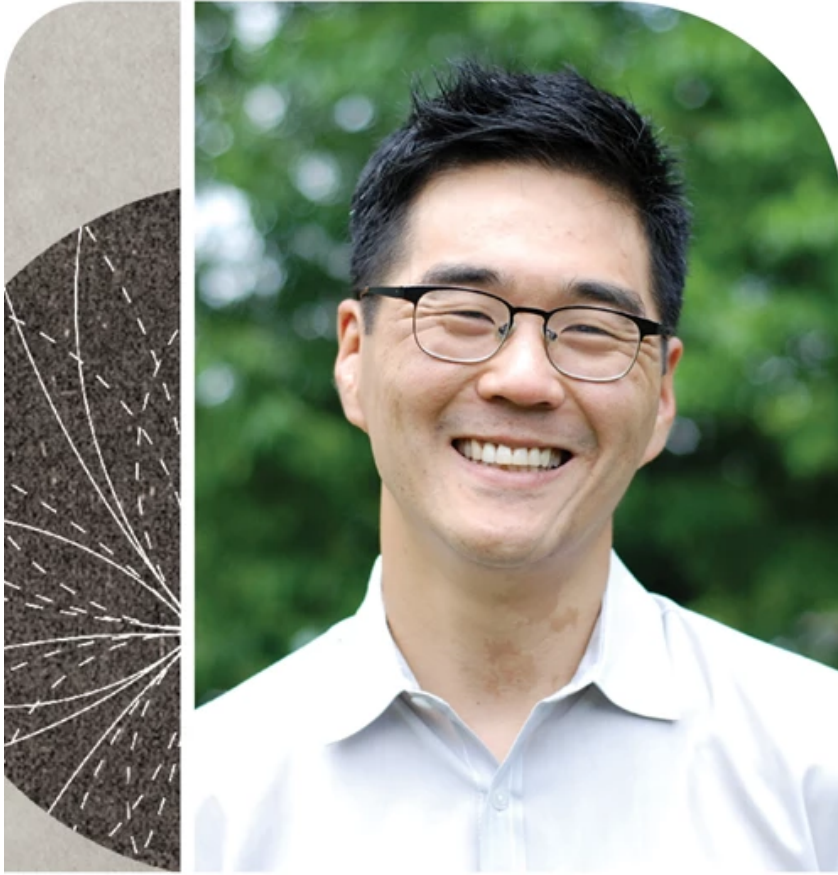


Image: Courtesy of Mitch Kim

“The multiethnic church often is a flower bouquet . . . its best day is the first day.”

Even as the church has strived in the past six years to create a new culture, its congregation—roughly 60 percent white, 25 percent Asian, and 15 percent black and Latino—has soared, from about 500 to 800 adults.

Last year, after the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the church planted two “Black lives matter” signs outside of its main campus building. It posted a similar digital banner on its website, with links to resources and a theological defense of the statement.

People of color at Wellspring “felt like this was a very concrete and costly ask for those who are of the majority culture to embrace the burdens and heartaches of their brothers and sisters,” Kim says. Some of the Asian Americans who were frustrated with changes after the merger approached Kim with words of encouragement: “This gave them hope for our multiethnic church, that this is not just going to be a majority-culture space sprinkled with some color, that it was not going to be the reality, and that their brothers and sisters were going to be allowed to bring all of themselves to church.”

A multiethnic church that creates space for people to grow alongside each other in their fullness, Kim says, is a church that does not sever people’s roots and allow them to wither and walk away.

“The danger is that the multiethnic church often is a flower bouquet, where you cut off people from their culture, the roots of where they’ve come, and you gather it together so that its best day is the first day,” Kim says. “When you bring them all together, you bring them in full bloom. ‘Look, we have a Latina! Look, we have a black person! Look, we have a Chinese American! Tell me about your culture.’ But over time, there is no root.”

Multiethnic churches should function instead more like a graft: two shoots still connected to their roots. Yes, Kim says, the shoots must be cut and wounded before they can be bound together. But what grows, he says, is something that didn’t exist before.

“If you’re second or third generation, your lived experience is a graft. In your own body, you’ve had to merge your immigrant culture and the American culture. And you’re always wrestling with ‘Who am I in the midst of all of this?’ ” he says. “There’s a craving: ‘I want to bring all of myself to church.’ So that’s my hope: What second gen, third gen have been doing in their own bodies and their own families, that we would learn how to do that as a church family.”

Erin Chan Ding is a freelance journalist who lives with her husband, son, and daughter in the Chicago area. She has written for The Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, and The New York Times and was a staff writer for the Detroit Free Press.