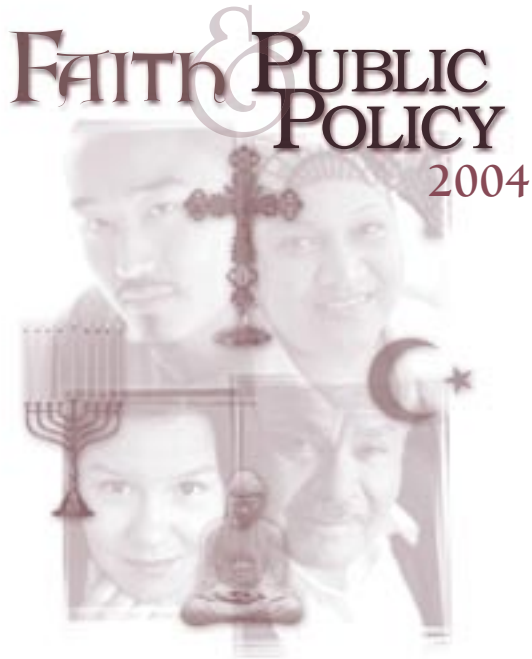


PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY
School of Public Policy



IMMIGRANTS, RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS, AND THE CIVIL SOCIETY

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“ In them [the foreign-born congregants] I see more dedication and a real reverence for God because of their tradition, and they show more seriousness about evangelism and outreach in support of other people than those born here. ”

— *Pastor John Saenz*

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“...religious faith and practice seem certain to play critical roles in helping [immigrants] negotiate all the changes and stress that come with international migration. No other social institution plays as crucial a role in assimilating immigrants into U.S. society.”

— Gregory Rodriguez

Many who have written about the “American character” have distinguished their studies against a backdrop of earlier governing regimes, whether tribal gatherings or city-states or nation-states, that typically found cohesion through ethnic homogeneity. They have, in the process, described an “American exceptionalism” that finds structure and solidity in common values and ideals rather than common bloodlines. Founding documents like the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution attempt to capture, codify, and celebrate this moral-cultural confection that we have come to call a “civil society.” While its institutions are fragile and never secure beyond the commitments of each generation, it has proven to be quite hardy, offering the promise of something even more permanent than ethnic uniformity.

IMMIGRANTS, RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS, AND CIVIL SOCIETY

By James R. Wilburn

The Civil Society

Michael Novak has noted that the concept of the civil society is larger than and prior to the notion of the state, for it is a moral reality that is at the heart of our experiment in self-government. In a word, citizens in a civil society voluntarily form their own social organizations and only, as a last resort, turn to the state when other options fall short. In fact, for Novak, “turning to the state is considered a morally inferior, although sometimes necessary, way of proceeding—a falling away from the project of self-reliance and self-government.”¹

But many well-intentioned citizens today are not convinced that this heritage is intact and in good health. They wonder about the extent to which the civil society is still our preferred regime and whether the values and ideals that define its margins are still visible and sturdy. The question is particularly pressing to those who fear that immigrants may be overwhelming the culture that made our civil society unique and diluting its core values.

One place to test these concerns is to study the role of religious congregations in integrating immigrants into American society. To discover that religious congregations play a significant role in the integration of immigrants into American civil society should be no surprise. When Tocqueville visited America in the early nineteenth century, he concluded that religion, one of

the most vital expressions of social organization, was the “first political institution” of democracy. This was especially true given the reality that ethnic connections have never played the prior role in defining the American experiment. In a prescient way, the decision by the early church to baptize Gentiles without first requiring that they be circumcised defined the Jerusalem disciples as more than just another Jewish sect, certainly larger than an ethnic enclave, and confirmed in the early origins of Western civilization that freedom of conscience, as Novak notes, “is the first of all freedoms.” Thus religious faith, which is prior to, larger than, and beyond the reach of ethnic insularity or political institutions, is extraordinarily qualified to provide solidarity to this new regime.

While this civil society of self-governing institutions has been left free to be more robust by the separation of church and state, civil society is largely, though paradoxically, fueled and strengthened commensurate with the influence of religion on politics. One of the findings of the Pepperdine study of the role of religious congregations in the experience of immigration is that immigrants are often much more religious after they arrive in the United States than they were in their homeland. This may well be because it is precisely one’s allegiance to the “heavenly city,” which is the purpose of religious congregations, that endows humans with the love of liberty and the valuing of individual persons that has been so central to the American experience. It will not be surprising that our study strongly suggests that this close connection between spiritual commitments and the love of liberty is integral to understanding a civil society and that it sets America apart from nations whose history and nature is largely explained by their contiguity with ethnic borders.

In addition, the civil society that has, from its birth, gathered sustenance through its deep roots in churches and synagogues has also looked to these religious congregations to develop leaders for the other civic institutions that characterize a civil society. The experience of immigrants has been especially reflective of this connection.

The Immigrant Nation

However else we describe the uniqueness of the United States, it is truly a “nation of immigrants.” In some sense, this experience is not as unique as it may sometimes seem, for the story of the human race itself is the story of constant migration. The story surely includes the first “native” Americans who came in various waves, each replacing, influencing, and being

influenced by the migrants who came before them. Whether the earliest, who came centuries before the Europeans arrived, were Asian or Caucasian remains a matter for debate. But more critical than the interesting but conjectural dialogue about who was here first is the way in which we define what it means to be participants in this “civil society” today.

Acknowledging that we were all immigrants at some time should not gloss over the fact that there are many faces of immigration. There were the huddled masses yearning to breath free who risked so much to find a new life and who were welcomed to American soil by the Statue of Liberty’s raised torch. Then there were the “uprooted” ones of Oscar Handlin’s classic book,² the first and second generations, crowded into urban ghettos with all their horrible living conditions and psychological agonies. Beyond that are the images of the once-aspired-to “melting pot” through which a new American character was thought to have been molded from the ingredients of diverse cultures from around the world. Or there is Michael Novak’s “unmeltable ethnics,” capturing the rich diversity of many cultures existing side by side, each honoring its own history, nurturing the community’s memory on its holidays and through its unique traditions while at the same time learning to participate in something new and uniquely American.³

That more recent waves of immigrants should cause concern about their impact on civil society is not new. Such anxiety has accompanied each of the major waves of immigrants, whether the Irish in the early nineteenth century; the immigration from East and Southern Europeans that crested shortly after 1900; or more recent waves from Asia, Mexico, and Central America. However, there may be a new element in our current experience in that immigrants now, through technology and ease of transportation, are able to continue their contact with their places of origin at the same time that they seek ways to assimilate into a new environment. The globe is, indeed, shrinking, and the experience of integration may be quite different than in previous periods.

No one has expressed this concern more persistently over the past decade than Samuel P. Huntington. Being quite explicit about his understanding of what the core culture of America comprises, Huntington perceives a trend toward cultural diffusion in the United States that threatens to shatter American society into a heap of social shards. He points specifically to immigrants (and global business leaders) who succeed in assimilating into American society without assimilating its core culture, often even maintaining dual citizenship without a strong national loyalty. Such a form of immigration, some

maintain, is a new experience reflecting ease of travel and continuing and close communication with a former culture.⁴

Faith and Public Policy

The “Faith and Public Policy” series, annually staged by the School of Public Policy at Pepperdine University, attempted in 2004 to advance our understanding of our civil society by investigating ways in which religious congregations of various faiths facilitate the integration of immigrants from vastly diverse ethnic backgrounds into this less tangible but nevertheless more lasting order. The research, its consequent conference, and the publication of the report have been made possible by generous grants from The Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation and the William E. Simon Foundation. Gregory Rodriguez, who is now a senior fellow with the New America Foundation and who authored the major findings of the study, has a long history with the Pepperdine University School of Public Policy. Rodriguez authored the first study published by our Davenport Institute on the emerging Latino middle class as we were planning the new school in 1996. Rev. Karen Speicher, while a graduate student in the School of Public Policy at Pepperdine, assisted with much of the fieldwork, interviewed many immigrant church leaders, and has included a follow-on article designed to capture the spontaneous flavor and fertile variety of activities from the perspective of those leading them “on the ground.”

Both in the engaging summary by Gregory Rodriguez and in the examples shared by Karen Speicher, there is surprising evidence that the role of religious congregations in nurturing and strengthening the place of civil society in the lives of immigrants has been greatly neglected and underestimated. Indeed, its power has been either overlooked or largely discounted by a wide variety of students of politics and religion, including representatives of the more liberal intellectual elite on one side and more conservative scholars on the other, who should find in this report reason to be encouraged at the evident health of a civil society which is, in fact, being constantly strengthened and continually renewed by recent immigrants.

No topic more closely captures the direction of the School of Public Policy at Pepperdine University than this one. The school’s founders and its faculty have been unashamed to return faith to the public square. Their effort to bring a fresh and revitalized approach to public policy by emphasizing public-private partnerships and the moral and cultural underpinnings of a free society (which are so often neglected

on today's university campuses) defines the unique mission of the school. Reflecting this is an excellent piece of scholarship that will make a significant contribution to the conversation about the nature, the present condition, and the future prospects of our civil society.

James R. Wilburn is dean of the Pepperdine School of Public Policy.

Endnotes

¹ Michael Novak, "The Future of Civil Society," *Crisis* 14, no. 8 (September, 1996).

² Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951).

³ Michael Novak, *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics and Culture in the Seventies* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1971).

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996); Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We? The Challenges to America's National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004). Others who have considered similar concerns include John J. Miller, *The Unmaking of Americans: How Multiculturalism Has Undermined America's Assimilation Ethic* (New York: Free Press, 1998); Stanley A. Reushon, *Dual Citizenship and American National Identity* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Immigration Studies, 2001); Robert T. Samuelson, "Can America Assimilate?" *The Washington Post*, April 6, 2001; and Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1992).

“ In terms of religious preference, contemporary immigrants are far more diverse than those who arrived a century ago...Most significantly perhaps, the percentage of immigrants who come from outside the Judeo-Christian heritage is more than four times greater than among native-born Americans. ”

— Gregory Rodriguez

Americans most often view immigration in terms of its broad economic, political, and social implications. In the public's eye, immigrants are seen—in the words of Emma Lazarus—as “huddled masses.” They arrive nameless and faceless on America's proverbial shores. Reams of immigration studies published each year attempt to measure their collective progress, their rates of educational attainment, homeownership, or linguistic assimilation. Scholars assess their impact on the nation's budget or infrastructure. Can we absorb them? Will they become us? Immigrants are almost always envisioned in the plural.

TAMED SPACES: HOW RELIGIOUS CONGREGATIONS NURTURE IMMIGRANT ASSIMILATION IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

By Gregory Rodriguez

But the act of migration is a highly individual experience. Resettlement is a solitary event. For any person, uprooting oneself from one's network of family and friends can also be profoundly disorienting. Feelings of loss about a former home can create anxiety. The reduced power to influence unfamiliar surroundings can frustrate the newcomer. In his classic work, *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations that Made the American People*, immigration scholar Oscar Handlin described the history of immigration as “the history of alienation and its consequences.”¹ Seeking to put a human face on the great waves of newcomers, Handlin chose to highlight the individual hardship of “the broken homes, interruptions of a familiar life, separation from known surroundings, the becoming a foreigner, and ceasing to belong.”² Unfortunately, most contemporary scholarship, with its strong materialist, secularist, and quantitative bent, tends to ignore the most intimate aspects and implications of contemporary migration. This includes many of the most intimate and important relationships people have—those with their closest relatives, friends, and with their God.

Most personal aspects of the immigrant experience may belong more to the realm of poetry than they do to social science. “In a city or a village which we have known well since our childhood we move in a tamed space, our occupations finding everywhere expected landmarks that favor routine,” Nobel-Prize-winning poet Czeslaw Milosz has written. “Transplanted

into alien surroundings we are oppressed by the anxiety of indefiniteness, by insecurity.”³

Thrown back on their own resources, immigrants are often forced to rethink their own identities and their relationship to the world around them. Their circumstances often compel them to ask existential questions such as “Who am I?” The radical change of location and cultural milieu can unsettle the immigrant's self-conception at the most basic level. Describing the mixture of immigrants who made up the great wave at the turn of the twentieth century, religious sociologist Will Herberg wrote: “Men and women of many villages and regions were thrown together in the same ‘ghetto,’ and before long the new conditions of American life confronted the immigrant with a problem he had practically never had to face before, the problem of self-identification and self-location, the problem expressed in the question, ‘What am I?’”⁴

The late pastor and religious historian Timothy L. Smith called migration a “theologizing experience,” an event that urges an individual to find religious meaning in his life.⁵ “The moment the nearest range of hills shut out the view of the emigrant's native valley,” Smith wrote of past immigrants, “separation from both personal and physical associations of one's childhood community drew emotional strings taut. Friendships, however, were often fleeting; and the lonely vigils—when sickness, unemployment, or personal rejection set individuals apart—produced deep crises of the spirit.”⁶

For all the success the process of immigration has brought to individuals and the nation overall, millions have also had to pay a steep price. Assimilation tends to be a lonely, intergenerational process of individuation from ancestral identities. Most Americans do not think of their country as a large extended family in the way that, say, the French or Italians view their homelands. Intellectuals and political leaders often try to describe being an American in terms of cold abstractions and lofty ideals, like individualism; political freedom; or life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It is often seen as a journey toward an ideal, one that is accomplished in one generation or two.

But assimilation is far from being a linear, one-way process of forgetting. There is an intermediate stage of ethnic bonding—between the alienation of the immigrant generation and the anomie commonly experienced by latter-generation Americans—in which immigrants learn how to better negotiate their new surroundings. The hardship of an uprooted existence impels many immigrants to seek warmth and meaning in the collective experience. As a response to

the “anxiety of indefiniteness,” immigrants have tended to accentuate their ethnic ties on arrival in the United States. This search for affinity is not, as some critics suggest, a rejection of assimilation or integration into American society as much as it is a workable pathway toward that ultimate goal.

More often than not, religion—far more than secular ethnic nationalism—is the realm in which immigrants choose to nurture their ethnicity. Indeed, many scholars consider religion to be the most significant factor in identity formation in America. In his famous study *Protestant, Catholic, Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology*, Herberg argued that religion has long been a refuge for ethnic heritage in America. Religion has provided the one fundamental link to the homeland that immigrants could most successfully maintain in America. According to Herberg,

Of the immigrant who came to this country it was expected that, sooner or later, either in his own person or through his children, he would give up virtually everything he had brought with him from the “old country”—his language, his nationality, his manner of life—and would adopt the new ways of his new home. Within broad limits, however, his becoming an American did not involve his abandoning the old religion in favor of some native American substitute. Quite the contrary, not only was he expected to retain his old religion, as he was not expected to retain his old language or nationality, but such was the shape of America that it was largely in and through his religion that he, or rather his children and grandchildren, found an identifiable place in American life.⁷

Indeed, while assimilation has generally been understood as a centrifugal force, religious life in America has been decidedly centripetal. Founded in large part by religious dissidents, and populated by them throughout its history, the nation has remained not only remarkably religious in its habits, but in an ever-expanding variety of ways. Sociologists may have labeled the United States a “language graveyard,” but the same cannot be said for the fate of religious expressions and denominations.⁸ Religious pluralism is a much more widely accepted notion in American life than cultural and linguistic pluralism. According to one prominent scholar, the United States is “the most religiously fecund country” in which “more new religions have been born” than in any other society.⁹

The religious experience has been of particular importance to newcomers. Immigrants have never jumped off the gangplank eager to discard the beliefs, styles, and customs that gave their lives meaning. Assimilation has been central to the American experience since the first European colonists arrived in the New World, but its definition has always been a source of contention and confusion. In his 1981 book *American*

Politics: The Promise of Disharmony, Harvard political scientist Samuel P. Huntington describes three competing scenarios of assimilation in the United States. The first is Anglo-conformity in which immigrants would become Americans by fully adopting the culture of Anglo-Saxon Protestants. This approach was largely abandoned a century ago. The second is the melting pot, the process of intermarriage and cultural interpenetration that would meld Old World identities into a new and distinct American type. At best, this process would take many generations, if not centuries. In the third approach, which called for cultural pluralism, “a bargain was struck: ethnic groups retained so long as they wished their ethnic identity, but they converted to American political values, ideals, and symbols. Adherence to the latter was the test of how ‘American’ one was, and it was perfectly compatible with the maintenance of ethnic culture and traditions.”¹⁰

As compelling as these discrete categories may appear, the reality of assimilation, past and present, has encompassed all three definitions at once: conformity, melding, and pluralism. University of Chicago sociologist Robert E. Park developed the best twentieth-century definition of assimilation in the 1930s. According to Park, assimilation was “the name given to the process or processes by which peoples of diverse racial origins and different cultural heritages, occupying a common territory, achieve a cultural solidarity sufficient at least to sustain a national existence.”¹¹

Scholars Richard D. Alba and Victor Nee updated this concept for a globalized twenty-first-century America. They described assimilation as a dynamic, two-way process in which minority and majority cultures converge. In their rather fluid definition, assimilation consists of the blurring of boundaries among groups. Meantime, to them the concept of “mainstream” culture is ever expanding. “In a process of convergence,” they write, “the impact of minority ethnic cultures on the mainstream can occur also by an expansion of the range of what is considered normative behavior within the mainstream; thus, elements of Anglo-American or other origins are fused with mainstream elements to create a composite culture.”¹²

The usefulness of these last two definitions lies in their treatment of culture—be it minority or majority—as organic and malleable. It allows us to conceptualize both immigrant and mainstream cultures as fluid. Rather than envisioning immigrants as jumping from one fixed point to the next, we should regard them as reconstructing their own identities while simultaneously negotiating their relationship with their native and adopted cultures.

In this journey, religion plays a critical role, much as it did throughout the past century. Religion remains the realm in which immigrants most intensely negotiate their transition from past to future. More than any other American social institution, the religious congregation most effectively facilitates immigrants' assimilation into American life. Immigrant congregations simultaneously allow newcomers to nurture their ethnic ties even as they ease their adjustment into their new country. Today's immigrant churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples provide migrants both with the stability and the confidence to withstand the changes they must endure and with new skills to integrate into American life.

Looking Backwards: Religion's Role in American Ethnic Integration

Alexis de Tocqueville was perhaps the first observer to identify volunteer civic involvement as uniquely American. "Americans of all ages, all stations in life, and all types of disposition are forever forming associations," he wrote in the 1830s. "There are not only commercial and industrial associations in which all take part, but others of a thousand different types—religious, moral, serious, futile, very general and very limited, immensely large and very minute...Nothing, in my view, deserves more attention than the intellectual and moral associations in America."¹³

One hundred and seventy years later, Americans are still more likely to be involved in voluntary association than are citizens of most other countries. *The World Almanac* lists 2,380 groups—from the Aaron Burr Society to the Zionist Organization of America—with at least some national reputation.¹⁴ Scholars such as Harvard's Robert D. Putnam have argued that heightened civic engagement is a form of social capital and that the resulting networks of trust are an added benefit to American society. "Civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in a dense network of reciprocal social relations," Putnam wrote.¹⁵

Religion long has been the preeminent form of voluntary association in American life. Historically, religious congregations have served as training grounds for broader civic involvement. The Civil Rights Movement, for example, emerged out of the activism of African American churches. Religious activities help Americans "learn to give speeches, run meetings, manage disagreements, and bear administrative responsibility."¹⁶ In fact, church attendance facilitates other forms of volunteering, philanthropy, and civic engagement.

Churchgoers are "much more likely than other people to visit friends; to entertain at home; to attend club meetings; and to belong to sports groups, professional and academic societies, farm organizations, political clubs, nationality groups, and other miscellaneous groups."¹⁷ According to a 1992 survey, 52 percent of Americans volunteer, and the largest portion (28 percent) of those volunteered for religious projects. More significantly, of all volunteers, 34 percent credited their religious involvement for their decision to volunteer in secular activities.¹⁸ As University of Chicago sociologist Andrew Greeley has emphasized rather pointedly, "only the deliberately blind will continue to ignore religion as a source of social capital."¹⁹

Organized religion is a particularly powerful source of social capital for newcomers to America. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, churches and synagogues introduced millions of rural immigrants to the complexities of "a highly organized, industrial world." According to historian Randall M. Miller, organized religion "rendered educational, social, material, and spiritual services, and in a crude way helped to settle immigrants in America."²⁰ While many Old World spiritual leaders warned emigrants of the evils of America—"Do not go to America," Rabbi Moses Weinberger urged Eastern European Jews in 1887—most immigrants maintained their faith once in the United States.²¹ In fact, because religion now fulfilled communal and ethnic—in addition to spiritual—needs, some immigrants became even "more attentive to ritual, than they had been at home."²²

Over the course of American history, the Catholic Church facilitated the integration of millions of immigrants—Poles, Germans, Irish, Italians, Slovaks, Czechs, and others. In 1785, there were only 23,000 Catholics in the United States. By the 1850s, the steady flow of mass migration from Europe had lifted that number to 3 million adherents. Most preferred to celebrate Mass in their mother tongue and take communion from a co-ethnic priest. "The Irish," wrote the Reverend Jeremiah Cummings in 1847, "find it difficult to discard their affection for everything that concerns Old Hibernia...the Germans stay on their own and do not want to have anything to do with the Irish," while the French-speaking Catholics in Detroit liked to "dress up" the church "*à la française*."²³

The large, and widely dispersed, community of German immigrants most forcefully pushed the American Catholic Church into establishing "national parishes," congregations drawn on ethnic rather than territorial lines. As early as 1787, a group of German worshippers in Philadelphia organized

the German Catholic Society. The association informed John Carroll, the first American archbishop, that in order “to keep up their respective nation and language,” they were “fully determined to build and erect another new place of divine worship for the better convenience and accommodation of Catholics of all nations, particularly the Germans under whose direction the building was to be constructed.”²⁴ Two years later, Holy Trinity Church became the first national parish in the United States.

To the Germans, there was an intimate association between faith and language. It was fine to learn English, one priest told parishioners, because “...in English you must count your dollars, but in German you speak with your children, your confessor, and your God.”²⁵ For German Catholics, the church played an instrumental role in preserving the mother tongue. Furthermore, with the possible exception of Jews, Germans established more ethnic institutions and associations than any other immigrant group in U.S. history. German Catholics developed their organizational life around the parish. Churches would sponsor a variety of *vereine* (social clubs) that sought to fulfill parishioners’ personal, religious, and ethnic needs.

Overall, national parishes negotiated a compromise between “the demands of immediate assimilation and the resistance of immigrants to abandon their traditional” language, ethnicity, and forms of religiosity.²⁶ The Catholic faith may indeed be universal, but each ethnic group had its own style of devotion and favored certain saints over others. The Germans revered St. Boniface; the Polish, St. Stanislaus; the Irish, of course, had St. Patrick.

With each wave of immigrants, this diversity in the expression of faith expanded. The first Italian national parish, St. Mary Magdalene de’ Pazzi, was established in Philadelphia in 1852. As Italian immigration swelled in the late nineteenth century, so did the demand for ethnic parishes. It was in these churches that Italians and their priests defended themselves from discrimination and asserted their self-respect. As Italy had not been a united nation before 1871, many Sicilian, Neapolitan, and Calabrese immigrants first developed an “Italian” national identity in Catholic churches in the United States. After touring Italian parishes in the United States in 1915, a visiting priest from Italy described them as places “where one learns Italian and love for the distant fatherland along with religion. It takes care in the kindergarten of the children of working mothers. ...It has a hall for meetings of the numerous societies which somehow relate to the church. Sunday school is taught here. Even *feste*, entertainments for the families and their children,

are also held in the parish hall, where a variety of activities for assistance to the Italians have their office. The Parish house is the house of everybody.”²⁷

With each ethnic group, the role of religion in the integration process differed. In stark contrast to the Irish, whose faith in the institutional church was second only to their belief in Christ, Italians did not practice a church-centric form of Catholicism. Italian Catholicism was more a folk religion that revolved around hearth and home. In the mother country, Italian peasants tended to see clergy as oppressors. Italy’s nationalist revolution was fought, in part, to curtail the church’s right to tax the faithful.²⁸ But in order to preserve their traditional faith in the United States, Italian immigrants could not “depend only on liturgical rituals, customs, and familism. To survive, [Italian Catholicism] had to be transformed into...a more efficient expression of associational life.”²⁹

Rather than lose their faith through migration, the ethnic Italian Catholicism that emerged was significantly more institutionally oriented than the folk religion of the old country. A strong organization of ethnic parishes maintained folk traditions while meeting the needs of an impoverished and isolated minority. In the process, Italian immigrants had learned a valuable lesson on how to navigate life in America. The ethnic church was the place where mutual aid societies were established and where the unemployed could hope to find assistance. It was a refuge from mainstream America where immigrants could enjoy “free association and autonomous identity.”³⁰ Religious congregations provided an opportunity to transcend the loneliness of migration and to integrate into American life collectively.

Historically, immigrants have not transplanted their faiths as much as they have transformed them to fit into a new environment. No longer embedded into a familiar landscape or routine, maintaining religious tradition has always been a voluntary act for the immigrant. As David O’Brien, a professor of Catholic studies at the College of the Holy Cross, has written: “People made choices (among these the decision to move) and then the deliberate, reasoned decisions to join together to form associations, often religious, to maintain group integrity, support family and communal values, and negotiate the demands of change.”³¹

Volition, key to American civic identity, was a critical part of immigrant religious life. If immigrants chose to raise their children in their religious tradition, they had to make a conscious decision to make it happen. As members of a minority group in the United States, they could not take

cultural matters for granted since there were so many other forces, both secular and religious, that could influence their choice.

As a result, immigrants often had to be *more* attentive to their religious practices than they may have been in the old country. Jewish immigrants who organized synagogues along ethnic lines experienced the same phenomena. In New York's Lower East Side, Romanian, Hungarian, and Russian Jews established their own national synagogues. Rituals such as the *kaddish* (prayers for the dead) were more faithfully observed in a foreign land where the future was more uncertain than they frequently had been at home.³² In general, immigrant congregations were "not transplants of traditional institutions but communities of commitment and, therefore, arenas of change," wrote Timothy L. Smith. "Often founded by lay persons and always dependent on voluntary support, their structures, leadership, and liturgy had to be shaped to meet pressing human needs."³³

Over the past two decades, religion scholars have developed this concept of "agency," highlighting the fact that immigrants are exerting power and choice in their decision to recreate their religious heritage in the United States. It is this concept that allows us to see heightened ethnic identification as part and parcel of the process of assimilating into America. Writing of contemporary Chinese immigrants, sociologist Kwai Hang Ng of the University of Chicago argues, "immigrants come to learn the 'American Way' through a creative employment of their own cultural categories, symbols, and practices."³⁴ The same can be said of the many ethnic groups who established and maintained their own religious associations in the United States. Ironically, the maintenance of ethnic associations in America has been a great U.S. civics lesson for millions of immigrants.

Over time, ethnic Catholics would become more "Americanized" even as American Catholicism often absorbed aspects of their ethnic religiosity. Italian folk traditions—for example, the street processions, the deep devotion to the Virgin, and the idea that religion was not only to be celebrated on Sunday—influenced the way non-Italians approached their faith. "In its easy embrace of the sacred and the profane, the street and the sanctuary, the public and the private, the religious experience of the Italian immigrant community transformed modern America's notion of religion."³⁵ Majority and minority cultures converged. Assimilation, propelled by the power of faith, took place.

"Dams on this Bay of Transition"

Since 1965, when Congress liberalized the nation's once-restrictive immigration quotas, millions of new immigrants have changed the face of America. Unlike past newcomers who came primarily from Europe, two-thirds of post-1960 immigrants have come from Latin America and Asia. Between 1990 and 2000, the foreign-born population increased by 57 percent, from 19.8 million to 31.1 million. By comparison, the native-born population grew by 9.3 percent.³⁶ The Census Bureau estimates that 11 percent of U.S. residents are foreign-born, midway between the high of 15 percent in 1890 and 1910 and the low of 5 percent in 1970.

Fully 29 percent of the nation's contemporary immigrants reside in California, the majority in Southern California, and more than one-third of California's immigrants (38 percent) reside in Los Angeles County alone.³⁷ Today, the City of Los Angeles is 41 percent foreign-born, a figure comparable to Chicago in 1890 and New York in 1910. The historic high for each city was 47 percent for New York in 1860 and 50 percent for Chicago in the same year. In addition to Los Angeles, the Southern California cities of Glendale, Santa Ana, El Monte, East Los Angeles,³⁸ and Garden Grove are also included in the ten places of 100,000 or more population with the highest percentage of foreign-born residents in the nation.³⁹ The top six countries of origin for legal entries in fiscal year 2002 to the Los Angeles/Long Beach metropolitan area were Mexico (35 percent), El Salvador (9 percent), the Philippines (7.1 percent), China (5.5 percent), Guatemala (5.1 percent), and Iran (4.1 percent). That year, 57 percent of legal entries were from Latin America. From Asia, there were 33 percent. Los Angeles is home to more Mexicans than any other city in the United States. It also has the largest population of Koreans, Vietnamese, Iranians, and Chinese of any place in the country. Fully one-quarter of Chinese Americans live in Southern California.

In terms of religious preference, contemporary immigrants are far more diverse than those who arrived a century ago. Approximately two-thirds of new immigrants are Christians, well below the comparable figure (82 percent) for the native-born population. The proportion of Catholics among contemporary immigrants is 42 percent, nearly double the percentage among the native-born. Fully 15 percent of new immigrants, the majority of whom are from current and former Communist countries, say they profess no faith at all.⁴⁰ Less than 3 percent of new immigrants are Jewish, more than two-thirds of whom come from the former Soviet Union.

Most significantly perhaps, the percentage of immigrants who come from outside the Judeo-Christian heritage is more than four times greater than among native-born Americans. Of newcomers, 8 percent are Muslim, 4 percent are Buddhist, and 3 percent are Hindu.⁴¹

Given that Mexico provides more than a quarter of contemporary immigrants to the United States, it is not surprising that it also is the top provider of both Catholic (27 percent) and Protestant (12.4 percent) newcomers. The top five nations of origin for Catholic immigrants also include the Philippines (12.6 percent), Poland (7.4 percent), the Dominican Republic (6.1 percent), and Vietnam (5.5 percent). The top five sending nations for Protestant immigrants also include Jamaica (12 percent), the former Soviet Union (6.2 percent), the Philippines (5.5 percent), and Ghana (4.4 percent). Predictably, the largest share of Hindus comes from India. The top providers of Buddhists are Taiwan (21.4 percent), Thailand (19.5 percent), Vietnam (16.7 percent), China (11 percent), and Japan (5.2 percent). The countries that send the most Muslims are Pakistan (18.4 percent), Bangladesh (10.6 percent), Jordan (9.4 percent), Iran (6 percent), and India (5.6 percent).⁴²

Not surprisingly given the overwhelmingly Latino character of its immigrant pool, Catholicism is the most common faith among newcomers to Los Angeles. In fact, there are more Catholics in Los Angeles County than there are members of any other religious group. This has been a critical factor in the revival of Catholic faith in Los Angeles. Most of the nation's larger dioceses were losing numbers and closing schools in the 1970s and 1980s, but large-scale immigration from Latin America re-energized churches in Los Angeles. The Los Angeles archdiocese has more congregants than there are Episcopalians nationally and as many as there are Presbyterians. An estimated 70 percent of Los Angeles Catholics are Latinos, many of whom are immigrants.

But it is not just Latinos who are changing the church. Asian Catholics now outnumber white Catholics.⁴³ Each week in the Los Angeles archdiocese, now the largest in the country, Mass is celebrated in 42 different languages, using 38 distinct ethnic liturgies. Roughly three-quarters of the archdiocese's parishes have at least one Mass in Spanish. The church actively seeks to appeal to a broad array of ethnic constituencies. In February of 2004, when the first Filipino American bishop, Oscar Azarcon Solis, was ordained at the new cathedral in Los Angeles, the majority of onlookers were Filipinos, many wearing *barongs*, Filipino formal wear. The Philippine

ambassador to Washington was also on hand. The spokesman for the archdiocese emphasized the salient role ethnicity plays in local Catholicism. "We are all Catholics, but we all bring our own culture," he said.⁴⁴

The American Catholic Church no longer sanctions national parishes, but scores of churches in the Los Angeles archdiocese have become *de facto* Mexican immigrant congregations. But today, as in the past, these immigrants' faith is transformed in the process of migration. These changes have a major impact on the path to assimilation into American society.

In some ways the current experience parallels that of the Italians of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Like Italy, Mexico is a heavily Catholic nation, but much of its locus of faith lies outside the church. Much of Mexican religious practice is celebrated in the form of shrines, processions, and other public and private devotions. In Southern California, nearly every grocery store stocks devotional candles for the home. Images of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the patroness of Mexico, are painted on walls in Mexican neighborhoods.⁴⁵ A historic shortage of priests and the historic conflict between the church and the government in Mexico forged an anti-clerical streak in Mexican culture, which historically has depressed church attendance.

Yet, like the Italians, Mexicans' faith becomes more church-centered after they settle in the United States. Rates of church attendance are higher for Mexican immigrants in the United States than they are for their counterparts in Mexico. "They become more church-going in this country," says Virgilio P. Elizondo, a prominent Mexican American theologian.⁴⁶ In fact, this phenomenon appears to be relevant to past Mexican immigrants as well. While a 1958 Mexican study showed that only 20 percent of rural Mexicans and 17-18 percent of urban Mexicans attended church weekly, a 1970 study revealed that 47 percent of Mexican Americans in Los Angeles attended Mass once a week.⁴⁷ Since Vatican II, however, the American Catholic Church, more so than its Mexican counterpart, has been restructuring its ministries to allow laity to take on more leadership roles. Indeed, immigrant churches throughout Southern California host an impressive list of parochial associations.

St. Thomas the Apostle in the Pico Union district in Los Angeles, whose burgeoning parish is mostly comprised of Mexican and Central American immigrants, is a good example. After a fire gutted the church in 1999, the parish was rebuilt within a year to accommodate twice the number of worshippers. Today, the church boasts no fewer than sixty

to seventy ministries led by lay people, all of whom are offered leadership training.⁴⁸ Groups are organized to serve the needs of a wide variety of parishioners, from associations dedicated to Hondurans and devotees of the Virgin of Guadalupe to ministries for adolescents and reforming alcoholics. “The church is a bridging institution where [immigrants] can feel at home and celebrate some of their traditions, make contacts, speak their language and praise God in their way, and it is a refuge in an alien experience,” says St. Thomas pastor, Fr. Jarlath Cunnane.⁴⁹

Parishes like St. Thomas the Apostle also serve an important function as community and relief centers in times of tragedy both in Los Angeles and abroad. After Hurricane Mitch killed thousands and devastated parts of Central America in November of 1998, St. Thomas the Apostle became a clearinghouse for donations to victims. Neighborhood residents like Margarita Córdoba took cans of coffee and oatmeal to the church after they failed to contact relatives in Honduras. Non-Central American neighbors also stopped by to provide support. Francisca Muñoz, a Mexican national, wiped tears from her eyes as she dropped off food and clothing at St. Thomas Church. “It’s painful to see what is happening there,” she said. “You really have to be an evil person to not be touched by this tragedy.”⁵⁰

Voluntary Associations

Immigrant churches in Los Angeles not only help newcomers connect to their home countries and to each other, but they also serve as a bridge to the wider community. St. Thomas the Apostle, for instance, encourages its parishioners to be active in the community. “We do...seek to give people a way to participate and be heard publicly and bring people together with schools and police and housing authorities,” said Fr. Cunnane.⁵¹ Today, as in the past, the church is usually the most powerful American institution with which immigrants have regular contact. The archdiocese has also taken on a crucial role in advocating for the rights of immigrants. From Cardinal Roger M. Mahony to parish priests, church leaders often serve as mediators between immigrants and all layers of U.S. government. In parishes like St. Thomas the Apostle, which has a large percentage of undocumented parishioners, church advocacy takes on an even more important role.

Local parishes also provide social services to their parishioners in a way that seeks to liberate the needy rather than render them dependent. “We offer all the social services, and it’s

not some kind of patronizing charity,” said Fr. Cunnane. “It is more of a self-help kind of charity.”⁵² Immigrant churches often provide English and citizenship classes. According to one national study, Latino religious bodies, Catholic and Protestant, provide outreach that “includes helping to secure jobs and better wages and working conditions. It also includes immigration aid, ministry to gangs, childcare, after school care or mentoring, and drug rehabilitation.”⁵³ If Latino parishioners have any say, churches may become even more engaged in social issues. A 2003 survey funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts found that 62 percent of Latinos wanted their churches or religious organizations to become more involved with social issues. “Many people think that because Latinos come from countries where the governments are often repressive that they would shy away from social engagement here in the United States,” said the study’s project manager and professor of religion at Northwestern University, Gaston Espinosa. “This is not the case. In fact, Latinos want their churches to become more involved in social, educational, and political issues, although less so in politics.”⁵⁴

Typically, Mexican and Central American hometown associations are established in Catholic churches in the Los Angeles area. They play a significant role in immigrants’ adjustment to life in the United States. These associations, which are organized by residents of the same native town or state, have a variety of functions. “They are ‘social clubs’: opportunities and places to gather and socialize, exchange information about relatives, the hometown, jobs, housing, moving, and documentation. They offer company for the sick and provide other forms of mutual aid.”⁵⁵ Many hometown associations raise funds to help members attend funerals back home. Others help build roads, churches, and schools in the villages they left behind. They simultaneously help members maintain ties to the homeland and provide them an opportunity to assimilate the social and political values of American civic life.

Over the past two decades the number of Mexican hometown associations has grown sharply in Los Angeles. In 1995, there were an estimated 109 such clubs. By 1999, there were nearly 230. The president of the Southern California *Federación de Clubes Jaliscienses* (Federation of Jalisco State Clubs) reported that his umbrella group consisted of fifty-two separate associations with between 10,000 and 15,000 members.⁵⁶ This is particularly significant given Mexicans’ general unwillingness to “establish independent organizations in their native land.”⁵⁷ Asked why these associations were so popular among immigrants, one member of the

Mexican consular corps gave four reasons: “(1) Immigrants are influenced by the ‘organizational environment’ of U.S. society; (2) a U.S. perspective allows the Mexican-born to perceive ‘the deficiencies of our country’ and to develop a ‘critical spirit’; (3) some members have achieved the leisure time to dedicate to organizational tasks; and (4) independent organization is discouraged in Mexico, especially in the rural areas from which most club members hail.”⁵⁸ Through these typically church-based associations, immigrants learn a sense of their own political power and the ability to influence social and political change both in the United States and Mexico. As Mexico’s ambassador to the United States said in 2000, Mexican immigrants who have settled in the United States have a “natural desire to be good citizens of this country,” an aspiration that is “perfectly compatible” with cultivating “their roots and ties with Mexico.”⁵⁹

But the church’s role in assimilating immigrants is more than just social. Church teachings also provide a spiritual value that helps migrants find solace in exile. “The biblical language is very real here,” said Fr. Cunnane, and people “face many dangers to get here.”⁶⁰ Hardship also makes migrants more eager to hear the language of personal salvation that one normally associates with Protestantism. “We can appreciate the charismatic personal salvation aspect,” said Fr. Cunnane, “but [we cannot] allow it to become just a personal conversion.”⁶¹ The immigrants’ desire for a more individually oriented, emotional approach to God is both challenging the Catholic Church and leading more Mexicans and Central Americans to move toward evangelicalism. According to Fr. Allan Figueroa Deck, a Jesuit theologian and director of the Loyola Center for Spirituality in Orange County, Latinos “are at various stages of modernization. They sense that their communal orientation to religion is inadequate. They seek a more self-conscious, individualized faith.”⁶²

Evangelical organizations like Victory Outreach (*Alcance Victoria*), which has hundreds of churches in the Los Angeles area, offer a religious message that helps many immigrants better negotiate the difficulties of resettlement. In addition to preaching the notion of a personal relationship with God, Victory Outreach and other evangelical churches emphasize the limits of “individual choice in the face of God’s omnipotence.”⁶³ Spreading a strict message of salvation from sin and degradation, evangelical churches often attract rural immigrants seeking refuge from the hardscrabble streets of urban neighborhoods. Today, as yesterday, immigrant religious congregations can help newcomers find the strength and discipline needed to survive the stress of their

newfound freedom from the traditional social mores of their villages. As historian Timothy L. Smith has written about past immigrants:

Preoccupation with the ethical dimension of faith was one outcome of such uprooting. Once in America, immigrants uniformly felt that learning new patterns of correct behavior was crucial to their sense of well-being. Everything was new: the shape and detail of the houses, stairways, windows, and stoves; the whirl of engines, trolleys, furnaces, and machines; the language, facial expressions, dress, table manners, and forms of both public and private courtesy; and, most important of all, freedom from the moral constraints that village culture had imposed in matters monetary, recreational, occupational, alcohol, educational, and sexual. Each immigrant had to determine how to act in these circumstances by reference not simply to a dominant “host” culture but to a dozen competing subcultures, all of which were in the process of adjustment to the materialism and the pragmatism that stemmed from the rush of both newcomers and old timers to get ahead.⁶⁴

Many other immigrant congregations also help parishioners deal with the uncertainty and stress of migration. Studies have shown that Korean and Vietnamese religious institutions play a key role in providing psychological support for immigrants. One 1995 study of Vietnamese adolescents showed that religious participation heightened ethnic identification which, in turn, facilitated “adjustment to the host society precisely because it promotes the cultivation of a distinctive ethnicity, that, in turn, helps young people to reach a higher level of academic achievement and to avoid dangerous and destructive forms of behavior.”⁶⁵ In essence, the ethnic church, which represents the “one element of real continuity between their country of origin and their new home,” helps link the “American-born or American-reared children to the ethnic group” even as they gain “acceptance in the host society.”⁶⁶

Most ethnic religion congregations might highlight ethnic continuity, but many immigrants also change their traditional religious heritage. In fact, it is common for Korean immigrants to switch their faiths either before or after they resettle in the United States. Christians make up 25 percent of the population of South Korea, but fully three-quarters of Korean Americans are active participants in Protestant Christian congregations.⁶⁷ According to one survey, “half of Korean Americans are Presbyterians, mostly of the deeply conservative variety.”⁶⁸ Further data suggest that this phenomenon is not due simply to selective migration. Whereas half of Korean immigrants to the United States were Christians when they left Korea, another half convert to Christianity upon or shortly after arrival.⁶⁹ According to Jae-Youn Kim, the pastor at World

Vision Church in Northridge, California, Korean immigrants “change their religion to Christian because they are a stranger [sic]. They don’t speak English very well, they don’t have a job. They join the church for life. If they are real Christians or not, only God knows. But as time moves on, they change and grow in their faith.”⁷⁰

The more than 800 Korean churches in Southern California also play a critical role in helping immigrants physically establish themselves here. “When immigrants are coming to America, a church pastor in Korea or family members call or send a letter to let us know they are coming,” said Pastor Kim. “The church picks them up at the airport, and they stay with church members in their homes until they get a job and a home... Church members support them with basic necessities from cookware to helping with getting the children enrolled in school.”⁷¹ Once immigrants are established, churches can also help them get a leg up in America. “The [Korean] church gives them the opportunity to regain prestige that they lose coming over that they used to have in their vocation back home,” said Rebecca Kim, a sociologist at Pepperdine University. “People want more out of the church here, it is not only religion, it is [also] community and prestige.”⁷²

Korean churches, like Korean immigrants, are found both in the city and the suburbs of Southern California. Pastor Kim’s church, the \$12-million, 85,000-square-foot World Vision Church in the San Fernando Valley, is a symbol of both the suburbanization and the Christian fervor of Korean immigrants.⁷³ The congregation started in 1987 with twenty-five members and was located in North Hollywood. Within four months, it grew to 100 members and began holding services in another church. Today, World Vision has roughly 600 members and its own church. The grand religious structures like World Vision are in the tradition of St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York. They help ethnic parishioners feel they are making a permanent mark on their new environment.

As is the case with other ethnic Protestant churches, the establishment of multiple congregations is itself an act of voluntary association. Small Protestant congregations, in particular, provide laity with the opportunity to develop social, administrative, and political skills. As one Korean congregant put it, “We built this church with our own hands...with cardboard, nails, and hammers. We came after work and stayed until two or three in the morning.”⁷⁴

Scholar R. Stephen Warner has argued that these types of small immigrant religious institutions “approximate the congregational model that has existed in American

Protestantism since its inception, with emphasis upon voluntary membership rather than ascription or geography, lay involvement in decision making, a professional clergy,... financial support from members, the development of community centers, and the provision of social services.”⁷⁵ Yet even as churches facilitate the integration of Korean immigrants into the United States, they do not neglect to emphasize parishioners’ shared ethnic heritage. As sociologist Alan Wolfe has written, Korean churches strengthen ethnic ties, even though “the religion that inspires them is American at its core.”⁷⁶

Koreans are not the only Asian immigrants to switch religions upon migration. While only 2 percent of the population of Taiwan is Christian, anywhere from one-quarter to one-third of Taiwanese immigrants to the United States are Christians. In many Taiwanese congregations, “as many as two-thirds of the members are converts.”⁷⁷ For Chinese immigrants overall—both from Taiwan and mainland China, “Protestantism, by a wide margin, has surpassed traditional forms of religion like Buddhism and Daoism to become the most practiced institutional religion in the United States.”⁷⁸ For Chinese who live in racially mixed suburbs and work or study among non-Chinese, the ethnic church provides an opportunity for nurturing ethnic culture and connections. These churches make a strong effort to preserve traditional language and values. Many offer Chinese language classes for the children of immigrants. Others attempt to blend Confucian values with Christian theology. Most Chinese Christian churches continue to celebrate the Chinese New Year. Immigrants “tend to build churches like dams on this bay of transition,” says Rev. Dr. Kenneth Fong, senior pastor at Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles in Rosemead, California.⁷⁹

This widespread conversion to Christianity is all the more remarkable given China’s checkered relationship with the Western faith. Not until the mid-nineteenth century did Christian missionaries even begin to penetrate Chinese societies. In 1949, the Communists ejected all foreign missionaries out of mainland China, where Christians made up less than 1 percent of the country’s current population of 450 million.⁸⁰ Likewise, in Taiwan, Christians have never made up more than 5 percent of the population.

Under Communism in the mainland there developed “a strong anti-Christian [sentiment] among the Chinese. Christianity was regarded as part and parcel of Western imperialism, the spiritual opium for conquering the Chinese nation. Chinese converts to Christianity were chastised with this common

sarcasm: 'One more Christian, one less Chinese.' In other words, becoming Christian was defined as losing Chinese identity.⁸¹ "To counteract the notion that becoming Christian is to not be Chinese, Chinese Protestant churches in the United States are forced to 'sinicize' Christianity."⁸² One study of a Chinese church in the Midwest found that worshippers inject aspects of Chinese culture—"particularly its understanding of the self, its imageries of deities, as well as its emphasis on practical blessings"—into their Christian faith. In other words, Chinese immigrants "convert Christianity into a faith that resonates with their own cultural values and sensibilities."⁸³

Similar to other ethnic experiences, Chinese Christians often see their churches as refuges from the more negative aspects of American popular culture. First-generation immigrants often see the ethnic church as an important mechanism in keeping their children bound to family, language, and tradition. But the assimilative pull is as strong among today's second-generation kids as it has ever been. Hence, the ethnic church is very often a place of cultural conflict between generations.⁸⁴ "The immigrants want the American-born young people to show deference and obedience, whereas the [American-born children] want more independence and respect. The immigrants want to pass on the Chinese language and Chinese traditional culture to their children, whereas the [American-born children] want to go their own ways with liberty."⁸⁵

Chinese Buddhist temples in the United States are also places of cultural blending and conflict. Just as Chinese Christians "sinicize" their religion, "Chinese Buddhists strive hard to Americanize their religion."⁸⁶ Many Chinese Buddhist temples have adopted practices common in Christian churches—such as establishing choirs, youth groups, Sunday schools, and Sunday worship services. It is not uncommon to find monks taking on the role of Christian pastors. The temple also takes on roles that it normally does not have in the home country. The extraordinary 15-acre, 102,432-square-foot Hsi Lai Temple in the San Gabriel Valley, the largest Buddhist temple in the Western Hemisphere, strives "to be more than a place for meditation and instruction in Buddhism alone. The objectives of the temple are to (1) expand skills and talents through education, (2) to foster an awareness of Buddhism through charitable programs, and (3) to cultivate human minds through Dharma practice."⁸⁷ Significantly, the very name Hsi Lai can be translated in English as "Coming to the West." In 2002, another mega-congregation, the Pao Fa Buddhist Temple, opened in Orange County. Its opening-day celebration symbolized the linking of East and West. In

addition to the consecration of the three eight-ton Buddhas carved from solid white jade and the recitation of sacred readings, there was also a performance of "The Star-Spangled Banner."⁸⁸

In most heavily Buddhist societies, lay people do not take leadership roles in temples. In China and Korea, in particular, temples are centered around monasteries. In other countries, Buddhists are normally not encouraged to become members of a temple, and many worshippers attend multiple shrines. Temples in the United States, however, have begun to offer memberships with annual dues. The temples' nonprofit status in the United States also requires that lay people become more intimately involved in the administration of the congregation. A board of trustees must be formed, and money must be raised.⁸⁹ In similar fashion, many immigrant Hindu temples and Islamic mosques are also developing membership systems and seeing more lay participation in decision making. As scholars Fenggang Yang and Helen Rose Ebaugh have argued, "American laws and democratic norms appear to be overriding forces favoring the changes toward a lay-centered religious community."⁹⁰

The Islamic Center of Orange County in Garden Grove is another example of the "Americanization" of non-Christian religious faiths. As Alan Wolfe points out, there is probably "no aspect of Islam that can be maintained in the United States in the same manner it is maintained in Muslim-majority societies."⁹¹ The Islamic Center is far from being a traditional mosque. In addition to offering the option to attend Sunday—rather than the traditional Friday—services, the Islamic Center provides counseling services, a preschool, a mortuary, and a wedding chapel. The congregation also elects an eleven-member governing council, which is made up of both men and women. Mosques abroad often receive government funding, but the Islamic Center and other mosques in Southern California support themselves by raising money from worshippers. One survey indicates that American Muslims believe that the money should be spent to tend to the broader needs of the community. Of respondents, 67 percent believed that it should provide "special educational and recreational programs for teenagers."⁹²

None of this means that spiritual needs have taken a back seat to social issues among immigrant Muslims. Echoing studies of European immigrants of a century ago, scholar Raymond Brady Williams found that immigrants from Pakistan and India "are religious—by all accounts more religious than they were before they left home—because religion is one of the

most important identity markers that helps them preserve individual self-awareness and cohesion in a group.”⁹³

But perhaps because Muslim identity trumps national identity in much of the Arab world, Southern California’s immigrant Muslims tend not to organize mosques along lines of national origin. Rather, an individual mosque can attract worshippers from a variety of nations. This is not the case for many local immigrant Jews. Southern California’s roughly 30,000 Iranian Jews maintain a distinct identity from other Jews, both immigrant and U.S.-born.⁹⁴ Their experience and tradition is largely foreign to the majority of Los Angeles Jews who are mostly Ashkenazi, that is, of European origin. The Iranians also distinguish themselves by being significantly more religious—and by their insistence on Farsi-language training for their young people—than the two other larger groups of Jewish immigrants, newcomers from Israel and the former Soviet Union.⁹⁵

It is likely that, to some extent, secularization will creep in over time and generations. Yet, as the vast majority of immigrants to Los Angeles have arrived in the past two decades, religious faith and practice seem certain to play critical roles in helping them negotiate all the changes and stress that come with international migration. No other social institution plays as crucial a role in assimilating immigrants into U.S. society. In 2003, the Nigerian Catholics who share St. Cecilia’s Church in South Los Angeles with Latino and African American parishioners dedicated a shrine in the memory of Michael Iwene Tansi, the West African Cistercian monk who was beatified in 1998. At the center was a painting that portrayed the would-be saint as divided into two sides. On the right, he is depicted in traditional Nigerian robes in his native African village. On the left, he is dressed in a Cistercian habit before a backdrop of the English monastery where he died. Of the shrine, a local Nigerian priest, Fr. Michael Ekwutosi Ume, wrote: “All immigrants embody two cultures and the spirit is trying to resolve the tension...Every immigrant can relate to the situation of Blessed Tansi and then ask for his intercession.”⁹⁶

The author, Gregory Rodriguez, is a senior fellow at the New America Foundation, a non-partisan public policy institute.

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“Immigrants often bring with them the kind of utter dependence upon God and prayer and a sense of genuine and fervent gratitude and eager spirit of service to others that can enliven a congregation or a denomination and bring stability to a neighborhood. In this, both the church and the immigrant have an important role in bringing to life the civic society which defines America.”

— Rev. Karen Speicher

In the midst of the exciting, confusing, challenging, and often-alienating experience of immigration to Southern California, both immigrants and the Christian churches that serve them are finding connection again with their unique stories, narratives, and purposes while recognizing, and many times embracing, their roles within the larger context of community and civil society. They come to this through a process of investigation, but not the type our society tends to place the most value on today. It is a process of investigation in which they search for wisdom as opposed to mere information by delving into the scriptures, paying heed to life stories, contemplating societal changes, wrestling with theological questions, and serving their neighbor.

THE STORIES THAT THEY TELL

Selected Interviews on Immigration, Christian Churches, and Civil Society in Southern California

By Rev. Karen Speicher

The Wisdom of Stories

In a society that often believes that information saves (the “Information Age”), the search for wisdom can often fall by the wayside. A common assertion and continuing hope appears to be that if the policy makers could just do enough research and complete enough surveys and studies on immigration and thus garner enough information about the sociological and economic effects of immigration on new arrivals, our civic institutions, and on Americans and the American way of life, then effective, practical decisions could be made. Such is the trust in information. But wisdom, on the other hand, is a knowing from within, not dependent on heaps of research (although research may be taken into account). Wisdom comes through experience, tradition, rational contemplation, and the sharing of stories. Wisdom leads to recognition of and embracing the mystery of life.

Immigration and the myriad of human relationships and civic arrangements it affects are far too intricate and complex to reduce to numbers or assertion/counter-assertion debates on the pros and cons of immigration in the United States. Thus, religious institutions and spiritual leaders have something unique and extremely valuable to offer to the immigration discussion because they are steeped in a tradition of exploring the mystery of life, intimate self-examination, and finding ways for people to live in meaningful community with one another. In fact, it is incumbent upon them to raise the questions and share the stories that expand the dialogue and capture the wisdom.

Professor Rebecca Kim, who teaches in the Pepperdine University Sociology Department and has explored immigration and religion extensively, has discovered that “there is the idea out there that immigrating itself is a theologizing experience in the fact that it brings up the existential questions of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘What is my purpose?’ And people want community as they struggle with those questions.”¹ Regarding these existential quests, Alasdair MacIntyre in his book, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, states: “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’... Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words.”²

Through real-life accounts, depictions, and stories of immigrants and churches in Southern California, one is able to view a snapshot of how churches and the religious life of immigrants affect their integration into civil society and, in the process, how immigrants may affect churches and American society as a whole. Such an experience may unashamedly resemble a testimonial more than a study. However, this small but necessary piece of the public dialogue about immigration can allow portions of the story from “inside the process” to peek up at you and draw you in, in a way not otherwise possible. It is meant to inspire questions for further discussion and review. For after all, the story we find ourselves a part of in America—and in Southern California specifically—is changing for all of us.

In his book, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Search for a Postliberal Order*, Ted V. McAllister writes:

Voegelin argued that all human stories begin in the middle... To be thrown into reality is to find oneself in the middle, confused but with some clues as to the meaning of one's existence. Those clues do not come to one as objects that might surrender their secrets to an inquiring physicist; rather, one comes to some understanding from inside the process. One participates in the very process under investigation. The “object” one seeks to understand includes one's self in relation to the rest of reality—the whole is hidden from view but understood as a necessary condition for one's search for personal meaning.³

This declaration rings doubly true for immigrants and the pastors and churches that serve them. As immigrants find themselves thrust into yet another middle of the story, their story, in yet another greater reality, the reality of living in America, they search for some clues to meaning through a relationship with the church. Fr. Jarlath Cunnane from St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Los Angeles captures this reality when he says: “The church is a bridging institution where they [immigrants] can feel at home and celebrate some of their traditions, make contacts, speak their language

and praise God in their way, and it is a refuge in an alien experience..., but people are here and do need to develop a spirituality that is true to the lived experience in the present and not just a journey into nostalgia. And still, in all that, I don't see any institution rivaling the church. The church is the crucial institution for the immigrant.”⁴

On the flip side, immigration is not only challenging to those who are immigrating, but is also challenging to pastors and congregations who are ministering to and with immigrants. This is because the pastors and congregations are finding themselves in the middle of a different reality and a different story.

In the following interviews, I found that religious leaders are searching for wisdom. They are laying claim to their roles as ones who listen with anticipation, tell with conviction, and interpret with an eye to the divine the stories of immigrants and their lives in Southern California while wrestling with theological and sociological questions associated with immigration.

Embedded in these interviews is the assumption that we, immigrant and native-born alike, are a historical people and that our lives are affected by and affect history. And human behavior is better understood in the light of community, in light of the “collective spirit” of people. The assumption draws upon the biblical text (both Hebrew texts and New Testament texts) in that we are a people within a history that God creates, and as human beings we can understand human nature and make meaning of our lives only in the context of that history.

God created humans to be in community. Communities of human beings have a collective spirit comprised not only of those now living, but also of those who have gone before. This assumption guards against an arrogance that any individual or that any generation or that any one part of the community has all the answers. It encourages temperate decisions and cautions against the proverbial throwing of the baby out with the bath water. It prevents individuals and self-interest from becoming the be-all and end-all of life decisions. It engages experience, yet does not deny that rules and consistency are important as well. It struggles to hold onto the claim that there are universal laws that do not change just because the majority of people might say so.

One of the main themes I encountered while conducting these interviews was that there is a certain sense that immigrants feel a very strong claim on biblical language, images, and promises. The life of an immigrant creates an extreme intensity of emotion and belief, an entitlement and obligation to search

the scriptures and avail themselves of the spiritual, emotional, and physical resources of the church.

Another theme running through the interviews is the desire to preserve traditions so that future generations will have an understanding of their history, the collective identity and values of their people in order to be in proper relationship with God and others. Although one might fear that this can lead to an inward focus and a somewhat separatist way of life, it can also lead immigrants to be more fully themselves and bring their particular ways, gifts, and skills with them as they integrate into their local civil and religious communities.

Often it seems that the more grounded they are in their own culture and traditions and the more they know their stories, the more open these particular immigrants are to an appreciation of the advantages of American life (including religious freedom, access to education, and the opportunity to advance one's family economically). This does not mean there are not struggles they face against racism, poor school systems in poor neighborhoods, poor pay for poor jobs, lack of housing, children being lured into gangs, or any of the myriad challenges they face. For indeed they do confront these obstacles. But the churches are a vehicle for giving voice to these concerns and for advocating for their rights. In addition, there are theological questions raised regarding how churches see themselves and their relationship to the wider community.

The Stories They Tell

So, let us jump into the middle of some stories of immigrants in Southern California. We begin with Fr. Jarlath Cunnane (Father Jay) and St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church in Los Angeles: “Our church is an immigrant church; immigration is who we are, it is not something that we just do or have a few programs for.” St. Thomas the Apostle Catholic Church is historically known as, and has a self-identity as, a Central American immigrant church. They celebrate festivals that are traditionally Salvadoran, Guatemalan, Honduran, and Nicaraguan, but numerically they now have more Mexicans, particularly from Oaxaca. Father Jay has been at St. Thomas the Apostle for six years and has been involved in immigrant ministries for twenty years. He emigrated from the northwest coast of Ireland to the United States twenty-six years ago. He shares, “I can identify with the immigration experience, and it was evident when I came to Los Angeles that if you want to serve all the people, you will need to learn Spanish and I did.” Among the issues

faced by parishioners that Father Jay says the church must address is the documentation issue. “It is the root issue and it colors so many other issues” including the immigrants’ search for work and the “potential of exploitation in the type of work that they get.” Another issue is that “an immigrant lives in two places, both emotionally and practically. There is a kind of dual allegiance and dual commitments.”

In terms of those in the congregation, “those who can become Americans do become citizens, and for many people the main motivation is practical.” When asked what some of the ways are that the church helps immigrants negotiate their new commitments in this new land, Father Jay responded that the church participates “in a community organization [LAMetro] that seeks to give people a way to participate and be heard publicly and bring people together with schools and police and housing authorities.” Noting that they have sixty to seventy ministries led by lay people and offer training for all of them, he observed that “the biblical language is very real here. People cross through deserts, and spend a long time doing it, and face many dangers to get here. There isn’t as much distinction between the church community and the broader community because of this shared [immigration] experience. We offer all the social services, and it’s not some kind of patronizing charity; it is more of a self-help kind of charity.”

There certainly are areas in which Father Jay sees a need for improvement. “We need to be a stronger voice in terms of the rights of immigrants and confront anti-immigrant attitudes,” he says. He also believes it is necessary to examine how the “very displacement and insecurity” of immigration creates a hunger for a more charismatic type of faith. While noting that many Central American immigrants he encounters immigrate due to war and social upheaval, Father Jay suggests that this is the reason that they are more susceptible to or hungry for a more charismatic theology as differentiated from the more traditional Catholic theology and practice. “The old gods and old religion of Catholicism are found wanting.”

Father Jay finds meaning and caution in relating contemporary immigrants to the Irish experience:

The traditional religion died with the famine, and people grabbed for continental Italian and French expressions of devotion that spoke to the heart. The God of the fathers is seen as unsophisticated, unlettered, unworthy of the modern era. It is curious to me that the dominant image of a Christian here is a guy in a business suit with a Bible under his arm, and I think it is connected. I see a connection to the evangelical that seems to be more successful, more enlightened in the ways of success in this culture... We need to be careful, vigilant, attentive to that

spirituality I mentioned earlier [charismatic], so that we can appreciate the charismatic personal salvation aspect but not allow it to become just a personal conversion. We must keep engaged with the community and surrounding world.

Father Jay believes this can be done through preaching and teaching by example. It can be shown in the way the church interacts with the broader community.⁵

If we move south from Los Angeles to the United Methodist Ministerio Hispano in Escondido, California, we encounter Pastor Ruben Torres who has been serving a congregation on the border. He states:

They [the immigrant Mexican members of the congregation] have fear. They are afraid of the border patrol. When they work, they see the border patrol, and they all the time feel fear. It is very emotional. It affects my congregation very deeply since many of the congregation are undocumented. They want to work and live life here, but they are always in fear. It is hard when we have forty-five, fifty, or sixty people in our congregation for worship on Sunday and then five, six, or ten are arrested by the border patrol in one day and are sent to Tijuana, and they call from Tijuana, and I tell them to call me and I will help in any way I can. It affects me very emotionally, I feel impotent to help.

Torres admits that it brings up issues of what to do. Since some of what can be done is illegal, it is a spiritual, ethical, and emotional struggle. One idea Pastor Torres has is to ask the United Methodist Church to develop identification cards with the denominational logo and the church member’s photo on them and try to make it so they are accepted at agencies and banks, but at this point it is just an idea. Pastor Torres has a musicians’ group that plays with him on Sundays (contemporary Christian music), and they give special concerts for the community too. They have had as many as 300 in attendance. The church is able to buy their musical supplies. However, their dream of becoming a traveling musical group is hindered by issues of documentation and identification.⁶

The California-Pacific Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church recognizes these issues and as Rev. Fernando Santillana, the associate director of Connectional Ministries, Ministerios Latinos, sees it, “the problem is that the church is always running, trying to catch up with society.” He believes the majority of churches are still working off a 1940s and 1950s understanding of assimilation when it meant getting a completely new identity. He believes the church must start utilizing an understanding of “enculturation” which he describes as, “Every person needs to go through a process of

enculturation even if you are in your own country. You go into a culture to learn it, which doesn't mean you will take over or adopt the culture." He echoes Father Jay's concerns regarding how the church can stay theologically true to its roots while welcoming immigrants.

He sees the majority of Latino immigrants coming from a Catholic background and either wanting to maintain some of that tradition, even in a different denomination, or being drawn to the more charismatic non-denominational or Pentecostal churches: "Methodists are in the middle. In our conference we have two models. One is the Methodists who attempt to be charismatics, and they grow really fast and then slow and degenerate because we make bad copies. The second one is the Methodists who are trying to be more open to Catholics who come to their church, starting with them where they come in."

He notes that women pastors seem more open to this second model. He tells the story of a United Methodist congregation in Southern California where the new immigrant families felt very strongly about first communion. United Methodists, on the other hand, do not practice first communion. In the United Methodist Church there is an open communion table and children may take communion without any formal religious teaching. However, the female pastor at the church found a way to celebrate communion that was meaningful to the families while still using the United Methodist communion liturgy. The pastor invited those children who were going to take their first communion to come to church on Sunday dressed in a way that would reflect their homeland, with the white dresses and outfits of their Catholic tradition. They were then asked to gather around the communion table to be specially recognized and offered communion first, before the rest of the congregation was offered communion at the open table.

Another story Rev. Santillana tells is that of a Methodist woman pastor ministering in a town where there are only two churches. One is a very old Methodist church and the other is a newer Pentecostal church with a Mexican American pastor. In the area, 80 percent of the population is comprised of Mexican field workers. The Methodist pastor is Anglo and does not speak Spanish, and she was surprised when so many of the people in the town began coming to her church rather than the one where their language was spoken. She discovered that it was because when they walked past the Methodist church, they saw the altar and the candles; and when they passed by the Pentecostal church, they did not see

those symbols because of the difference in liturgy with a more modern worship space. Rev. Santillana and others are watching this phenomenon closely, attempting to discover new ways of focusing first on the appropriate symbols of the faith of the immigrants to whom they minister rather than concentrating on dogma and doctrine. He knows there is an apprehension on the part of many pastors to begin this new way. "We often still try to 'convert' them from Catholicism, asking them to reject everything they had before and start new," he says. "There are some pastors who don't want to work with [this new model]. They feel they are being traitors to God."

Working with immigrants also brings up other theological and ethical issues of preaching, teaching, training, and organization for the church. Rev. Santillana says, "The biggest problem right now is that we are having to help pastors, especially the Hispanic pastors, to get away from relying so heavily on the very strong theology of Paul and get them used to reading the Gospel." For pastors there is also the matter of not just the language, but also the mentality of second- and third-generation immigrants being different from that of the first generation. "The sermons need to be different, not just translated one way or the other. Another problem is how do you confront the reality of 'you should not lie' when so many are needing to get false documentation to work."

As far as leadership training for the Latino clergy goes, Rev. Santillana tells this story:

There are three seminaries of the United Methodist Church that run the course of study program that prepares people to become local pastors without them going through the whole seminary and ordination process. One of them is Claremont in Claremont, California. At Claremont, the course of study can be used as a bachelor's degree equivalent to get into the Master of Divinity program. We need to make changes including the names of the classes. We need to contextualize the course, and we have made some major changes. For the course of study, all the materials are in Spanish. I think English is very important, and we encourage them to take English classes. Some materials are imported from other denominations in Latin America and Europe. One problem is that as local pastors, they don't get a vote in their annual conference and are not eligible for election to general conference, and therefore they have no voice in the system and lose power. There is also a systematic problem of moving pastors once they are well educated in order for them to make a higher salary. Latino pastors are moved out of Latino churches because the Latino churches can't afford them anymore.

The United Methodist Church does have the National Hispanic Plan which, Rev. Santillana proudly asserts, trains and prepares lay persons to assist the pastor and to provide strong leadership.

He adds, “All the modules for that plan have been written by Latinos.” When it comes to addressing societal problems and being active civically, “Sixty percent of the Hispanic churches in the California-Pacific Annual Conference are involved with the distribution of food, hospital and medical organizations, programs to stop gangs from taking over neighborhoods, working with youth who are in gangs offering a safe place to have hip-hop dances and contests where gang members agree to two conditions—no fighting (no weapons) and no drugs or alcohol.”

Congregations are also beginning to start and expand their family counseling programs, focusing on building unity between the mother and the father because, Rev. Santillana states, “The Latino women wake up to a different reality in our country, and they are not willing to take as much garbage as they were in their country.”⁷

Another perspective comes from the San Fernando Valley with Pastor Jon Saenz of the Victory Outreach in Canoga Park, California. “Pastor Jon,” as he is known in the neighborhood, along with his wife, Betty, have been doing work through Victory Outreach Ministry for the past ten years. Their church facility, a modestly converted space that blends with the strip of somewhat rundown industrial-type buildings along Deering Avenue, includes a flexible worship space used for worship services, fellowship, community meetings, and drama productions; a children’s nursery; and the GANG room (GANG stands for “God’s Anointed Now Generation”). Positive “tagging” or graffiti is allowed in the GANG room as an outlet for the creative, artistic drive of the youth. There is also a computer lab in the GANG room. Pastor Jon’s sons, who are still living at home, participate in the ministry as well. James, his nineteen-year-old son, is the leader of GANG and wrote the play, *Writers of Society*, about tagging and drugs and parenting based on a number of testimonials from the kids living in the community. His seventeen-year-old son, Peter, handles the audio and technical ministry, and his seven-year-old son, Filipe, is a bright and encouraging presence to all that is done.

In terms of civic participation, Pastor Jon leads by example. He is on the board of directors for Canoga Park/West Hills Chamber of Commerce and has certification from the California State University as a youth and gang violence intervention specialist. He has been recognized for his outstanding work by the 20th Senatorial District, the mayor, the California State Assembly, and the 3rd District Board of Supervisors, to name a few. The ministry outreach participates with the Juvenile

Justice Crime Prevention Act (JJCPA) and works with clients who are referred to them by the Los Angeles Probation Project. As chair for the neighborhood beautification program for the Chamber of Commerce, Pastor Jon organizes members of the community who have been court ordered to do community service in trash pickup and tree pruning efforts along Sherman Way from DeSoto to Canoga approximately every six weeks. Pastor Jon realizes that it can be very hard for new immigrants and that they often are discouraged and want to give up. Consequently, his church focuses on giving them spiritual encouragement shorn up with practical, neighborhood programs.

Victory Outreach in Canoga Park has both English-speaking and Spanish-speaking congregations. They hold their worship services separately but do outreach and service work together because having congregants who speak both Spanish and English is important in making connection with many of the people in the neighborhood. To no surprise, the English-speaking congregation is made up of mostly second- and third-generation Hispanics, while the Spanish-speaking congregation is primarily first generation.

The Spanish-speaking congregation provides a place for fellowship and a community of friends who help one another with material needs as well as spiritual concerns. Pastor Jon notes, “In them [the foreign-born congregants] I see more dedication and a real reverence for God because of their tradition, and they show more seriousness about evangelism and outreach in support of other people than those born here.” Pastor Jon and Victory Outreach are ministering to families and the issues they encounter due to immigration as well as teaching both youth and adults the benefits of civic participation.⁸

In a different part of the San Fernando Valley, an enormous, brand-new church structure stands proudly on Rinaldi Street in the Porter Ranch region. Here I met Pastor Jae-Youn Kim and took a tour of World Vision Church (formerly named Valley Christian Presbyterian Church). The congregation began in November of 1987 with twenty-five members on Laurel Canyon Boulevard in North Hollywood. After four months, their church had grown to 100 families, which prompted them to move to Woodman Avenue in Arleta, renting the Calvary Lutheran Church. The congregation members felt badly about having their own homes while at the same time, after sixteen years, not having their own church building. They were frustrated by not being able to fully practice their worship as they wanted, when they wanted. God has now answered their prayers, according to Pastor Kim; their new church

home (more of a campus setting) is now complete. Occupying twelve acres, it has 80,000 square feet (including a theatre-style worship space, a gymnasium, a multitude of classrooms and offices, a kitchen, and a fellowship room) with more than 450 parking spaces, open space, and a stream on the property that “is never dry.” They have around 600 members in combined regular attendance at their services, and about 250 of those are second-generation immigrants. They now have two services in Korean and plan to expand their English-ministry program with an English-speaking pastor.

The English ministry started because Pastor Kim and the church recognized that as the second generation in their church grew up, they began to leave the church to go to American churches. However, only a few actually joined American churches because they had a hard time adjusting, and then they would eventually stop going to church at all. The English-speaking ministry started about nine years ago and now averages more than seventy people, including grown children from members of the church and others from the community.

As for the Korean-speaking congregation, Pastor Kim notes that Korean immigrants who come from Korea and arrive in America change their religion to Christian because they are strangers, they do not speak English very well, and they do not have jobs. He says, “They join the church for life. If they are real Christians or not, only God knows. But as time moves on, they change and grow in their faith. There are more than 800 Korean churches in Southern California, [and] the church is the guideline for the new immigrants.”

Pastor Kim and World Vision Church typically learn about immigrants who are coming to the United States by getting a letter or phone call from a pastor in Korea or from family members. The church is then organized to pick them up at the airport and house them in church members’ homes until the new families are settled with jobs and housing. Once they have housing of their own, church members provide the basic necessities for getting the household set up, from providing dishes to helping the new families enroll their children in school. Pastor Kim attributes this to the fact that church members “remember how they were helped and then they help newcomers. I tell them that kind of message, sharing God’s love.”

Pastor Kim says, “Our congregation, we are a miracle. God answered our church members’ prayer. We have early morning prayer service at 5:15 a.m. every Monday through Friday (around 50 members in regular attendance daily) and at 6:15

a.m. every Saturday and Sunday (around 80 to 100 members in regular attendance).” These services are in Korean. The early morning prayer service or dawn prayer is an inheritance to the next generation, and about twice a year the church sets aside ten days when they fervently pray, especially for the new immigrant families. During these times, they do the prayer in English so second-generation members can understand it and practice it while they translate it into Korean for the first generation. Pastor Kim explains the reason for these twice-a-year special prayer services: “The second generation, they don’t know what can come from this early morning prayer; but the first generation, they know, they have seen and had the miracles, and they want the second generation to know. At first, in immigrant life, so many difficult things are coming up and they ask God for help, and we pray with them and for them, and God answers very quickly for the new immigrant!”

According to Pastor Kim, immigration takes a heavy toll on the children of new immigrants because the parents must go to work very early and get home very late. “The children lose their parents and they are lonely, and the children watch too much television, and the parents don’t know how to converse with their children and the gap grows.” The church takes action to counteract this effect by teaching about family issues in Bible study and bringing in special speakers from the police, the mental health field, the housing authority, and other agencies integral to a civil society. The church also has English-speaking staff who counsel children individually, make home visits to immigrant families, as well as host PTA meetings. Moreover, they have a special intercessory prayer program for immigrants who have family problems.

Pastor Kim sees Korean immigrants as having a lot to offer America. In fact, he sees the very fact that Korean immigrants have difficulty with the language and therefore difficulty participating through the many American organizations of civic society as a main reason that Korean immigrants offer an example to others for reviving the American work ethic. “Since they can’t express themselves through their language, they express through their work. Korean immigrants are very successful immigrants. They are diligent workers, and some have two jobs. Some work hard labor at gardening, maintenance, pool cleaners, laundry, or liquor stores, which... [is] dangerous work in jobs that many Caucasians don’t want to do. The Korean shows to their neighbor an example of a good worker. That is what they offer to society.” Pastor Kim also sees that other benefits that the Korean immigrant offers to society are in the scholastic commitment and achievements of Korean children and the low divorce rate among Korean couples. “We show society and America a really happy family.”

The members at World Vision Church participate in the larger community by collecting food and going to a Mexican community near Magic Mountain that is populated by many migrant farm workers where they distribute food once a week. They see it as a ministry of compassion, especially to other immigrants. They give money and send teams to start new churches in China and Korea as well as send short-term missions to Mexico, the Philippines, and Thailand. With medical supplies in hand, they periodically go to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan to provide food and special conferences and retreats for 300 church leaders and pastors. Once a year they invite families from the Korean Army here to stay at church members' homes and participate in two weeks of church service and programs. Most of those who come are not Christians. The church wants to share God's love with them and show what life can be like in America. In addition to the church programs, they tour places like Disneyland and the Grand Canyon. Through all these experiences, the host families pay for everything because the Korean Army families are very poor.⁹

In Rosemead, California, Rev. Dr. Kenneth Fong lives a story that he describes using images of fish, water, and dams in his book, *Pursuing the Pearl: A Comprehensive Resource for Multi-Asian Ministry*. In conversation, Rev. Fong uses this illustration: "First-generation people tend to build churches like dams on this bay of transition. I think the immigrants that are coming to our church are freshwater fish who have put on scuba gear." Rev. Fong is the senior pastor of Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles. He admits, "God had to work on my heart first. I grew up with a very strong prejudice. I didn't want to deal with first-generation Chinese. But my inspiration was getting reintroduced to what the gospel was all about," he continues, "and one of the fastest growing parts of this church now is first-generation immigrants from the Pacific Rim. This goes against most arguments and experiences that first generationals don't want to mix. But at least 20 percent, maybe more, of our multigenerational, multicultural congregation are first generation."

The Evergreen Baptist Church has an interesting history revolving around immigration. In 1925, a young Japanese pastor, Haruye Shibata, came to Boyle Heights, California, at the request of the Los Angeles Baptist City Mission Society. He began his ministry, grew a congregation, and started a church by the name of Boyle Heights Baptist Church, made up of first-generation Japanese Americans. By 1938, the English-speaking segment of the church was growing, and a young Japanese Canadian pastor came to the church and fostered great growth. Then in 1942 when the Japanese Navy attacked

Pearl Harbor, the members of the church were forced to leave their homes and church and begin a new life in internment camps. Even in the midst of captivity, they organized churches and kept their faith. At the end of World War II, many of the former members of the church began returning to Los Angeles with their families. On April 7, 1946, Rev. Paul Nagano began leading this second generation in the church. Because of the growth in the number of English-speaking members, the church adopted a new name, Nisei (Second Generation) Baptist Church of Los Angeles.

In 1949, the members realized that the name of the church did not address the third generation and the name was changed again, this time to Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles, since the church was located on the corner of Second and Evergreen. The church then separated into two churches, one made up of the first-generation Japanese, named Japanese Baptist Church of Los Angeles, and the other, Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles, made up mostly of second-generation Japanese and their children.

With a fear of an anti-Japanese sentiment, many of those who survived the war and internment camps sent their children to Japanese American Christian churches. This led to a wealth of young people coming to the church in the 1950s. In the 1960s, confronted by Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement and racial tensions, the church began questioning its own emphasis on Japanese Americans and decided to expand its focus to include reconciliation and social justice. In 1977, Cory Ishida became the first third-generation pastor to lead Evergreen. "His clearly more acculturated presence soon attracted growing numbers of American-born Chinese to the church." Coinciding with the arrival of Rev. Fong, the congregation claimed a new identity as an all-English-speaking Asian American church. At about the same time, the church moved to the San Gabriel Valley to reach more Asian Americans. In 1997, Rev. Ishida and his staff, along with approximately 650 members, started a new church called Evergreen Baptist Church of San Gabriel Valley, and Rev. Fong remained in Rosemead with the rest of the congregation of Evergreen Baptist Church of Los Angeles to focus more on being a multigenerational, multicultural congregation.¹⁰

My conversation with Rev. Daniel F. Romero, conference minister of the Southern California Nevada Conference of the United Church of Christ, began with Rev. Romero sharing his observation that the United Church of Christ was doing well on the broader issue of immigration policy since the denomination is encouraging churches to lobby for immigrant

rights and related issues. However, he feels they have come up short and have not done a very good job in opening up their churches or finding ways to reach Mexican immigrants. “For our people,” he observed, “it is not an issue of whether someone is undocumented or not, or Mexican or not. It is that it is hard to get people organized to make changes. For a while there was a task force on border justice, and the thing kind of dwindled and went out of existence.” That could be in part because out of 130 United Church of Christ congregations in the conference, there are only four Spanish-speaking churches, and three of those churches have been established for a long time.

Somewhat surprisingly, the conference has more than twenty Samoan churches and half a dozen Filipino churches. The Samoan churches were all self-started by families who came from the Congregational Church in American Samoa as early as the 1980s. The Samoan churches, which follow an elder system from their mother church, are dually aligned to the United Church of Christ and their mother church. It is a very interesting and unusual system. Rev. Romero explains, “The case of the Samoans is different from the Mexicans in that the Samoans come over freely. They get passports, and yet they have some of the same cultural concerns. They are petrified of losing their language, culture, and youth. There are Samoan gangs now. The church plays a major role in keeping the language and culture alive. The Samoans are going to be a strong presence for us [the United Church of Christ] in Southern California and Los Angeles County.”

The presence of the Samoan churches helps their parishioners maintain their culture and worship in their own language while filling a vital intermediary role between Samoan immigrants and the surrounding community. One way civic life changes is that many people who are not Samoan, in the community and at other churches, begin to immerse themselves in the Samoan culture through worship services and special cultural events held by the churches. They get to know their neighbors and therefore are more likely to invite, encourage, and respect Samoan participation in wider community activities and decisions, introducing them into other organizations of American civil society.

Rev. Romero’s membership is in a Filipino church in the conference even though he is Mexican American himself. He describes the Filipino church as very Latino. “When you get with the Filipinos who were colonized by the Spanish as we were, then the food and the culture feel very much the same. There is a generosity, an openness and vulnerability.”

However, this new way of being the United Church of Christ in Southern California does not come without its challenges. As Rev. Romero acknowledges, the more recent practice of the United Church of Christ to ordain gays and lesbians tends to clash with the traditional values of Latinos and Samoans and may take some years to sort out a resolution.¹¹

This question regarding how the United Church of Christ pursues its unique identity relates as well to how it can collaborate with civic organizations that share its concerns for immigrants. Obviously, this is not just a question for the United Church of Christ or one solely related to the change in church demographics and competition of values due to immigration. But for this United Church of Christ conference, immigration, and its effects on the makeup of the denomination, will play a crucial role.

The Story Has Not Ended

These have been but a few stories that create the interwoven and sometimes torn fabric of life and reality experienced by immigrants and the churches that serve them. Both immigrants and the churches contend with the awesome task of negotiating a wide range of tasks, expectations, values, responsibilities, and dreams. The church acts as the center from which the immigrant can interact with other social institutions. It provides a framework, encouragement, and resources for the spiritual, cultural, emotional, and physical coherence so desperately needed by the immigrant who enters into a new life that at its outset can be a disordered, uncertain collection of unfamiliar regulations and conventions coupled with high hopes and deep fears.

Immigrants are challenging churches not only to provide social services and link them with necessary community resources, but also to re-examine and reclaim the role of theological guidance both for the individual and also for the community at large. Immigrants often bring with them the kind of utter dependence upon God and prayer and a sense of genuine and fervent gratitude and eager spirit of service to others that can enliven a congregation or a denomination and bring stability to a neighborhood. In this, both the church and the immigrant have an important role in bringing to life the civic society which defines America.

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Endnotes

¹ Professor Rebecca Kim, interview by author, February 3, 2004.

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: Indiana, 1984), 216.

³ Ted V. McAllister, *Revolt Against Modernity: Leo Strauss, Eric Voegelin, and the Search for a Postliberal Order* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 227.

⁴ Fr. Jarlath (Jay) Cunnane, interview by author, February 16, 2004.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Pastor Ruben Torres, interview by author, March 15, 2004.

⁷ Rev. Fernando Santillana, interview by author, February 2, 2004.

⁸ Pastor Jon Saenz, interviews by author, June 4, 2003, and March 15, 2004.

⁹ Pastor Jae-Youn Kim, interview by author, February 20, 2004.

¹⁰ Rev. Dr. Kenneth Fong, interview by author, February 2004. Church history and demographic information provided by Rev. Fong.

¹¹ Rev. Daniel F. Romero, interview by author, March 9, 2004.

The Davenport Institute

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The main charitable purpose of the foundation is to assist those in need by providing the means through which they may help themselves. In implementing this philosophy, the foundation seeks to fund programs which are effective in promoting independence and personal responsibility among those in need. The foundation makes grants to organizations that help disadvantaged youth to develop the personal values and skills that will enable them to become independent, contributing members of society. To this end, grants are made to institutions providing family strengthening, and youth-focused educational opportunities and faith-based programs, as well as research and policy initiatives that support the foundation's work in these areas.

“The biblical language is very real here. People cross through deserts, and spend a long time doing it, and face many dangers to get here. There isn't as much distinction between the church community and the broader community because of this shared [immigration] experience.”

— Fr. Jarlath Cunnane

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