

Intergenerational Gaps within Ethnic Immigrant churches

We often encounter the stories of ethnic immigrant churches struggling to manage the issues that are caused by the generational gap which exist among the leadership of the first and second generation congregations. What causes and widens the generational gap? For instance, while the first generations have their set of ways and the expectations of doing church, which they have practiced for several decades, the second generation often prefer to create and establish their own style of ministry and the church that fits their language and culture. Thus these sources of generational gap hinders the immigrant church from creating a loving community.

Let's take a look at an example.

This is a dialogue between two English Ministry (EM) pastors, as one shares his difficult situation he finds himself in, caught between the two congregations (Ethnic ministry and EM). The pastor's main concern is whether to follow and satisfy the first generation non-English speaking ministry congregation and leadership's expectations, or to prioritize meeting the concerns and the needs of the 2nd generation English speaking congregation and their leadership.

Pastor 1: "Here we go again with the New Year's Eve joint service next week."

Pastor 2: "Are they asking the English congregation to join?"

Pastor 1: "Sigh, I don't understand why we need to do this every year. It is not really meaningful for the EM congregation members who don't speak Korean. They have a hard time engaging with the worship service. Some of our members don't even have any family members in the KM, so they feel awkward being there."

Pastor 2: "So what is the EM responsible for during the service?"

Pastor 1: "They've asked us to lead the praise in the beginning. But the problem is many of our praise team members cannot make it, because they have prior plans made with friends and family."

Pastor 2: "Well did you tell the KM about this during the planning meeting?"

Pastor 1: "What planning meeting? The KM always makes all the decisions and tell us what to do. I wish the KM could be more considerate and respectful towards the EM congregation. How nice would it be for once to ask what we prefer and to plan together from the beginning. Wouldn't that be a true intergenerational worship where everyone can contribute?"

Pastor 2: "I know what you mean."

Pastor 1: "Sigh. I got to make it work somehow. After all, they are the ones paying for my position."

This is a challenging reality of many English speaking ministers in the immigrant church. If the EM is financially independent yet decides to be a part of an intergenerational congregation, voicing their opinion or making a suggestion to the 1st generation Korean/Chinese speaking leadership becomes relatively easier. But unfortunately, this is often not the case for many of them.

In many cases, the reality is that the 1st generation congregation contributes a substantial amount of the EM minister's compensation. Due to the EM's financial dependency, the battle and the tension of power imbalance between the Korean/Chinese ministry and the relatively young EM cannot be resolved and continues to last. Regardless of the age of the EM congregants or the lead pastor, they are often regarded as the “young adults living in their parents’ basement.”

How about the 1st generations’ perspective? Let’s listen to a conversation between the associate pastor and one of the elders in charge of worship at the same immigrant church.

Elder: Did you inform the EM pastor that the New Year’s Eve service is going to be a joint service?

Associate Pastor: Yes, I did Elder Lee. They are going to help lead praise in the beginning and someone from the EM will read the scripture passage in English.

Elder: That is great to hear. I think it’s always good to worship together as a whole family. It will encourage many of our elderly members to see their children and grandchildren at church. This is also a good way to help the faith to be modeled and passed down to the next generation.

Associate Pastor: Of course, that is what we want as an immigrant church. We want to pass on our faith to the next generation.

Elder: It breaks my heart when I see a lot of my friends who’s kids and grandkids no longer attend our church. They tell me how they wish they could also worship together as a family especially on special occasions like New Year Eve.

Associate Pastor: Yes, I understand. It is very troubling to see many young people leaving the church when they grow up. This is why we need to stand strong and support and invest more in the EM ministry.

As the parents of the younger generation, the first generation has a good intention and heart of wanting to pass down their faith in this foreign country they have immigrated to. But unfortunately, in their eagerness to pass down their faith, they can often come across as being overbearing and controlling to the EM. On the other hand, the desire of the EM to become independent can come across as being ungrateful and self-centred to the KM.

What is your immigrant church context?

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