

# Transitions for Next Generation Korean Americans

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**F**or the past several decades, the growth of Korean churches in the United States has been phenomenal. Whereas many churches in mainline denominations have declined since the 1960s, Korean churches have grown significantly. A primary factor in this growth was the influx of immigrants starting in the late 1960s through the 1980s. The first Korean church outside Korea, Christ United Methodist Church in Hawaii, was established in 1903 by the first wave of Korean immigrants. However, the largest number of Korean immigrants came in the period known as the third wave following the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. This third wave of Korean immigration was the largest of all immigrations from Asia. Koreans came to the United States in search of economic and educational opportunities. In the late 1980s, as the Korean economy began to improve, the number of immigrants dropped significantly.

Many of the Korean immigrants arriving in the United States during this period settled in California and the New York region. Language was an issue, as many could not speak English fluently. They required support from one another as they sought to establish a new life in a new country. The church became that source of support for many. It provided a central place of gathering where people could communicate in their native Korean language. They could worship in Korean. And the church became the community center offering instruction in English, guidance in dealing with a new society, and help in starting new businesses. Korean church leadership tends to be resourceful and provides encouraging care for those facing the difficulties of life transition. The church also provided Korean language schools for the children of immigrants to retain the mother language and culture.

However, the future of these Korean churches has become questionable as the immigrant generation becomes older. Where does the church go from here? Many believe that hope lies with the children of the immigrants, known as the 1.5 and second generation Korean Americans. Yet the needs of these next generations are quite different than the needs of immigrants. Having been born and raised in the United States, language is no longer a struggle for these children. Additionally, due to the high value placed on education and hard work by Korean culture, most second generation Korean Americans are highly educated and successful in their social and economic lives. They no longer need support from a church community center.

A different type of struggle exists in the hearts of these next generations. Although they may be socially and economically

successful, many second generation Korean Americans are outcasts within their own communities. **With distinctive outer facial features, they are labeled as minorities by the general populace. No matter how successful they may be, they are always expected to prove themselves. Yet, they do not find solace in their home communities either, for many are considered "mere children" by the immigrant generation and ignored because they lack fluency in the native Korean language.** In addition, as intermarriage with other ethnic groups becomes more common, the need to remain within a strictly Korean community no longer suffices. Thus, the next generation Korean Americans face a crisis of identity and belonging as they strive to find their place in society.

These next generation Korean Americans need a new form of community center, and the church has the potential to fulfill that need. Leaders in the church must understand the journey and the struggle of these immigrant children. While these Korean Americans seem successful and self-reliant on the exterior, many seek to belong to a community and to build relationships with those who share common struggles and spiritual formation. It is an inner struggle within many immigrant children.

Although many Korean churches have established second generation ministries with services in English, these ministries are only temporary stepping stones that guide the next generation to find its place in a pluralistic society. Ultimately, the goal of pastoral leadership is to lead the people in discovering their identity as a part of God's multiethnic and universal community, inclusive of all people. A ministry that tries to isolate itself within its own culture cannot grasp the function in the breadth of God's creation. The church must lead the next generation to step beyond its cultural boundaries and join with others.



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