

Is There a Place for Biculturals in Missions?

by Chong H. Kim

Ethnic churches in the U.S. have been on the rise. Along with multiplying grassroots ethnic (i.e., “non-White”) church movements, more denominations and typical “overseas” mission agencies have focused their attention on establishing and developing churches for ethnic populations in the U.S. One exciting result is the visible mission zeal among ethnic Americans in recent years, especially the last decade. Witness the broad participation of ethnic students at the Urbana student mission conventions throughout the 1990’s and beyond (2000 and 2003). Given this reality, the US mission community would do well to take notice and develop the potential of ethnic American Christians for the future mission movement. As Paul McKaughan and the O’Briens point out,

In the evangelical missions community, those still dominating in leadership are primarily “male, pale and aging.” Missions in the future cannot maintain this status quo. In contrast, the growing edges of the evangelical church are within the ethnic communities, while the Anglo church has plateaued, or is already in decline.¹

Biculturals: Then and Now

Biculturalism is nothing new. Indeed, God has frequently (and effectively) used biculturals throughout history. Famous biblical examples include Abraham, Joseph, Moses, and Daniel in the Old Testament, and Hellenized bicultural Jews such as Paul, Barnabas, and Jesus in the New Testament. Ralph Winter reminds us that,

... Barnabas looked for Paul. He looked for a bicultural believer to help out in Antioch. When the Jerusalem group chose Barnabas, they chose a man who had bicultural experience. There is absolutely no substitute for bicultural people. All down through history, biculturals have had a phenomenal impact.²

Even today, Winter claims that “[t]he most effective missionaries are [unquestionably] either biculturals in the first place or are missionaries who became bicultural after years of effective language and culture learning.”³

There are more biculturals now than at any other time. Unprecedented migration, education, commerce, immigration, and/or refugee traffic have resulted in a huge explosion of diaspora communities around the world.⁴ Alejandro Portes describes these communities as “transnational communities.”

Chong Kim, a bicultural himself, founded the Korean American Center for World Mission, an affiliated structure with the USCWM in Pasadena, California in 1989 and served as its director from 1991 to 2003. He also founded and is currently directing Band Barnabas, a new sending structure focusing on equipping and sending biculturals to work among the least likely to be reached Muslims in Asia.

The global pool of MKs, many of whom are bicultural, is another—largely untapped—source of incredible creativity and energy in mission.

Transnational communities are dense networks across political borders created by immigrants in their quest for economic advancement and social recognition. Through these networks, an increasing number of people are able to lead dual lives. Participants are often bilingual, move easily between different cultures, frequently maintain homes in two countries, and pursue economic, political and cultural interests that require their presence in both.⁴

These transmigrants, Jehu Hanciles observes, are “incorporated as social actors in both.”⁵

Biculturals have the ability to relate to two distinct cultures and have command of at least two languages. Thus, they are sensitive to cultural differences and can adapt quickly to a third culture. They know how to live ‘liminally,’ in “a place of in-betweenness.” They have lived in a second cul-

ture setting long enough to experience culture shock and have had time to adjust and acculturate enough to feel at home in the second culture. Not surprisingly, biculturals are one of the hottest commodities in the multinational business sector, not to mention other private and public sectors.

One result of globalization would have to be the notable increase of biculturals, especially in the West. In addition to the transmigrants mentioned earlier, the international student population in the U.S. (most of whom are more transitory in nature than transmigrants) can easily be considered a potential source of biculturals and, thus, potential bicultural bridges to their people of origin.

The global pool of missionary kids (MKs), many of whom are biculturals, is another largely untapped source of incredible creativity and energy in mission. It is not uncommon to run into

generations of families who have been active in mission, especially in the West. It is my desire and hope that we will witness many global South MKs being released back into God’s mission cause. Korea now has more than 10,000 MKs, which should be recognized as a gold mine of future bicultural workers.

Going back to the U.S. ethnic church scene, not all ethnic Americans can properly be labeled ‘bicultural.’ Some ethnic American individuals have desired, for various reasons, to merge with mainstream white America, even if that has meant severing from their parents’ or ancestral ethnic identity and background. While some multi-ethnic churches certainly represent diverse ethnic backgrounds, they are still monoculturally mainstream American in nature.

As a bicultural Korean American mission recruiter and mobilizer, I have observed several exciting trends as well as some challenges for the U.S. mission effort to ponder.

As mentioned above, more ethnic Americans are now catching a mission

vision than ever before. And they are getting more involved as short-term as well as long-term cross-cultural workers. Recently, one prominent international agency had all Asian Americans in their candidate orientation program. Agencies that are more international in membership tend to recruit better among ethnic American potential candidates. It is not uncommon to find more agencies establishing ethnicity-specific recruiting and mobilization efforts. A few are even in the process of spinning off ethnicity-specific sending structures.

For example, Wycliffe Bible Translators USA has done an admirable job of recruiting ethnic Americans in recent years. Fifteen years ago, they established a Korean relations office as well as other ethnically-focused recruiting offices. In fact, they have looked beyond the American scene, tackling the recruitment of bicultural workers worldwide by establishing offices such as the Asian Diaspora Initiative. Partly due to initiatives coming from several Korean American missions and church leaders more than a decade ago, OMF-USA has also set up ethnicity-specific mobilization and recruiting offices. One example is the Korean American Mission of OMF, now called GEDA (Global Education Development Agency). While independent, GEDA continues to closely partner with OMF and has opened up a couple of strategic fields within OMF's Asian thrust.

In recent years, the *Perspectives* course has successfully penetrated, and is now enlisting students from a large number of ethnic American audiences, especially in major metropolitan cities. As a result of 9/11, ethnic American cross-cultural workers, especially ones who still hold a passport from their country of origin, have been able to go where visibly White American workers would have a difficult time going.

Obviously, ethnic American populations have their own set of unique challenges and obstacles. Some have to be dealt with by the ethnic Americans themselves, while some issues can be

addressed by the existing, predominantly White-led, mission effort.

Dealing specifically with the Asian-American⁶ audience, the usual top three challenges are parental opposition, pressure to go on with higher education, and the issue of debt. All three are intricately related. These challenges can become easy excuses for Asian Americans to bow out of the mission cause while there are other real issues beneath the surface. At the same time, for many people, these are real and often painful issues that prevent them from getting involved. Without sounding too simplistic, the sooner one addresses and deals with such issues before they become serious, the fewer heartaches one will have in the future.

The need to accept and affirm one's own ethnic identity is a topic that deserves a second look. When ethnic biculturals from the U.S. arrive on the mission field, they are not considered Americans by the local culture, but as part of the ethnic culture and heritage they represent. When I travel overseas, people will not stop asking me who I am or where I am *really* unless I tell them, "I am a Korean" or "I was born in Korea." In their mind, I am a Korean living in America, even though I am legally an American citizen. They don't even consider me an American. Missiologically, this is a significant edge that needs to be explored further and actively encouraged.

If people overseas don't see me as an American but as a Korean, I had better be acquainted with my Korean cultural background. If I am not comfortable with my Korean-ness and view myself as an "American," then I may experience a serious identity crisis because of the tension between my self-perception and how others perceive me. On the field, my perceived identity is Korean, whether I like it or not; I am not a representative of "White America."

Sizable numbers of young Asian Americans view themselves as either "American" or "Asian American" (with the emphasis on being "American").

The US media and even some mission mobilization sectors (promoting "oneness" in Christ) tend to downplay ethnic differences. Mobilizers may be successful at mobilizing "Americanized" Asian Americans without highlighting their ethnic roots because Americanized Asian Americans want to identify themselves as Americans anyway. However, if in the process of fielding these workers we fail to encourage and equip them to embrace their respective ethnic roots, we do them a disservice and what will await them is a rude awakening in the form of an identity crisis. Ethnic identities or cultural dispositions need to be awakened and highlighted in order for them to be effective workers on the field.

Biculturals are everywhere and can have significant impact in missions today. However, maximizing their potential will have to be an intentional choice for all who are involved, whether mobilizers or those who will decide where these workers will be placed on the field. **IJFM**

Endnotes

¹Paul McKaughan, Dellanna and William O'Brien, 1998. *Choosing a Future for U.S. Missions*. Monrovia, CA: MARC, p. 48.

²Ralph D. Winter, 1999, "Problems in the Early Churches: 1 and 2 Corinthians," in *Global Civilization, Classical World: Lesson Overview*, 47-2.

³Ralph D. Winter, *The GNMS: Whence and Wither*, unpublished manuscript, dated April 18, 2005.

⁴Alejandro Portes, 1997, "Immigration Theory for a New Century: Some Problems and Opportunities" in *International Migration Review*: 31(4), p. 812.

⁵Jehu J. Hanciles, 2003, "Mission and Migration: Some Implications for the Twenty-first-Century Church" in the *International Bulletin of Missionary Research*, 27(4), p. 29. Hanciles further claims that Africa is calculated to have lost about 1/3 of its skilled people (including 45% of its engineers) to Europe.

⁶I use the term Asian American as a mobilizer in the U.S., but the term, which was derived by the American media, is absolutely meaningless in a cross-cultural context, being distressingly non-specific (as opposed to Korean-American or Thai-American).