

Living between Cultures:
The second generation immigrant and refugee--
a new challenge for the church
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During the '80s and '90s, as immigrants and refugees arrived in U.S. cities in large numbers, the church began to hear God's call to this mission field in our own front yard. Many new culture-specific and language-specific ministries were started. Identifying leaders amongst these newcomers, and finding ways of providing seminary training, was imperative so that ministry could be done in the native tongue with cultural relevance.

Through the Pentecost 2000 initiative, the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod reached its goal of planting 1000 cultural-specific congregations in 2004. Many new cultural specific ministries shared facilities with English-speaking congregations. Members were excited; with their own eyes and ears, they could experience "foreign mission work." Most of these ministries are effectively reaching the first generation immigrant and refugee.

Their ministries, however, seem to be missing their own children, the second generation. The children of immigrant and refugees have been raised in the culture of the United States. English has become their first language; the language of their parents, their second language. While we might rejoice to able to live in two cultures and speak two languages, these children experience great pressure as they grow up between two cultures.

Many of these children, since they were young, have been their parents' teachers, translators, and interpreters of the culture. They have to learn American money, language, clothes, etiquette, play, music, and television, and then try and help their parents survive in this new culture. In contrast, at home they live in the culture and with the language of their parents.

Jhumpa Lahiri, an Asian Indian by birth, shares some of these frustrations in a Newsweek article of March 6, 2006:

Growing up in Rhode Island in the 1970's I felt neither Indian nor American. Like many immigrant offspring, I felt intense pressure to be two things, loyal to the old world and fluent in the new. . . . My perception, as a young girl, was that I fell short at both ends, shuttling between two dimensions that had nothing to do with one another.

I entered a world my parents had little knowledge or control of: school, books, music, and television, things that seeped in and became a fundamental aspect of who I am. I spoke English without an accent, comprehending the language in a way my parents still do not. . . . According to my parents I was not American, nor

would I ever be no matter how hard I tried. I felt doomed by their pronouncement, misunderstood and gradually defiant.

While we strive to reach the first generation immigrant and refugee, we shouldn't forget their children. Many of our culture and language-specific congregations do not know how to reach these young people. Not fully understanding U.S. culture, they don't know how to effectively communicate the Gospel contextually to their own children. The church, then, has the responsibility to reach out to the mission field of the second generation in the same way we did the first generation. Yet many of them are deserting the church because they don't feel accepted or they feel out of place in both cultural contexts.

Seeking to reach second generation Korean youth, one non-denominational congregation designed English worship specifically for the second generation immigrant. They were surprised to find they were reaching second generation young people from all ethnic groups. These young people found acceptance and built relationships with one another because they all had similar experiences regardless of their parents' cultural background.

With open arms, we need to make these young people feel loved and accepted in our midst. Jesus himself straddled two cultures as we read in Phil 2: 6-7:

(Jesus) Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness.

As a citizen of heaven and a citizen of earth, He understood cultural conflict, yet chose to live in this new culture, even to death, so that we can join him in heaven.

The church, the body of Christ, should be the ideal place for the second generation of all ethnic groups to find acceptance and meaning for their life. Our task is to open the doors and help them feel welcome and part of our fellowship.

Teachers, youth directors, and pastors need to work together, to build relationships, listen to these young people and find ways to relate the Gospel of Jesus Christ in their context. As before, we need to identify leaders who themselves have gone through this "cultural exchange," and make available deacon and/or seminary training.

This is the time for ethnic-specific pastors and leaders to work together with English language pastors and leaders to reach this new growing mission challenge. The future of culture-specific ministry, and the building of the Body of Christ among all ethnic groups, will depend on how we prepare ourselves to reach the second generation of the immigrants and refugees in our midst.