

Youth Ministry with 1.5 Generation Korean Americans: Conversion Stories of Love and Acceptance

A Song of Larvae

Larvae...

Born to be soaring butterflies above oppression and discrimination
Born to be dancing butterflies in the world of love and acceptance

A song...

Crying for pain and sorrow at oppression and discrimination
Crying out for love and acceptance

A song of larvae...

Dreaming of beautiful transformation to grow for the world of peace and justice
Dreaming of better becoming to show the world of reconciliation

—Sinai Chung, Dedicated to all 1.5 generation people in this land

1.5 generation: Gifted to bridge

This paper is about youth ministry with 1.5 generation Korean Americans (hereafter 1.5 KAS) based on my doctoral research done through hearing their life and faith stories. By the 1.5 KAS, in this research, I referred to “those who were born in Korea, came to America as teenagers, and spent their adolescent years in the United States either with their parents or by themselves.” In this sense, I can call them “teenager immigrants” as the most accurate term for this group of people. As the term, “1.5 KAS,” nuances, they are socially, culturally, linguistically, psychologically *between* the first and the second generation Korean immigrants; Koreans and Americans. In this research, I heard their uniquely intensified experiences of marginalization, confusion, and conflicts in their realities from such between-ness.

But we need to be aware that due to the very that between-ness, the 1.5 KAS are gifted to bridge the first and second generation Korean Americans as well as Korean and American cultures. They have a great potential to work for, and serve, both Korean and American societies and churches. In addition, because we are living in a global world where many will cross cultures and live between cultures, these 1.5 KAS may have much to teach all of us about living in that liminal space. As we are living in such a global world, we Christian educators need to recognize the significance of cross-cultural mutual learning. When we take seriously the authentic meaning of globalization that is not

domination of a culture over others but reciprocal interactions of cultures, we are responsible for encouraging and developing un-oppressive mutual cross-cultural educational ministries. In this sense, it is meaningful for us to give a special attention to the ministry with 1.5 KAS who have “beautiful” potential to bridge cultures un-oppressively and reciprocally from their own “site of life.”

Stories of the 1.5 generation Korean Americans

This qualitative research employed “intensive interview method” for data collection. I interviewed from April 13 to August 29, 2007 with 20 Korean American 1.5 generation young adults from 19 to 30 years old living currently within the Chicago area and its suburban areas (hereafter, the Respondents), followed by four months of transcribing and analyzing the data. Those ethnographic interviews allowed me to hear their life stories, with a special emphasis on their conversion experiences.¹

After the Respondents migrated to the United State as teenagers, they experienced marginalization, alienation, and discrimination. They felt lonely, hopeless, inferior, insecure, and unstable. For example, one of my interviewees, Peggy, said,

I could understand him (Cho of Virginia Tech Massacre) way enough...the event was not amazing to me at all...I could be him as well...the feeling that he might felt was latent within me...I was defiant toward the world just like him...I was in times of serious troubles...I was so lonely...I was a victim of racism from American friends ...I felt I was abandoned by parents...I was ignored by everyone...I was made fun of by Americans...I was so stressed...I was full of inferiority complex...thus I was lonely...you know...no one was with me...no one called me...no one cared me...yes...loneliness is the most important theme in my life because my life itself was so unstable and so marginalized from both cultures...I was...really...rootless... (Peggy, 3, 9)².

Their stories taught how much they suffered from the reality of being 1.5 generation. These stories made me realize the urgency of the ministry with them ultimately because their life experiences of sufferings might hinder them to actualize their dignity as human beings and their potentials for serving society and church as a bridge between cultures.

As the Respondents struggled with the reality of being 1.5 generation immigrants, they tried to settle down their agonies. Their initial religious conversions occurred as they searched for the relief from their sufferings. We Christian educators need to support them to experience such conversions so that they could soar over their hardships and actualize their true selves as “beautiful butterflies for the world of love, peace, and justice.”

Conversion Experiences of Love and Acceptance

¹ In this research, conversion means *a change or turning to God in Christ*— not a change to Christianity from other religions, both as an instance and as a process.

² All the quotations of the transcriptions of interviews with my informants were translated by myself.

Experience of Love and acceptance causes conversion

The Respondents' conversion stories showed that they were touched dominantly through God's love and acceptance; that they were reluctant to accept the issue of sin or were indifferent to it, even when they recognized it. As they were involved in their initial conversion, the Respondents' hearts were not moved by the realization of their sinfulness bringing deep repentance, but by the assurance of God's love and acceptance. For example, Peggy said,

It was the most difficult season in my life when I came to America alone for my education...I was 15 years olds...at that time, you know I denied God... when I was young I did not have firm faith either and I just went to church following my parents... but at those times I became more seriously bad in faith... I concluded that God does not exist...period...if God exists... why He made Americans hurt me and why He made my mom abandon me like this...I could not understand it...I was so negative toward my life and so defiant toward everything... I was so alone...no one called me and no one took care of me... I felt I would be totally destroyed... if I kept staying in America as it was...you know just like Cho from Virginia Tech...so I went back to Korea...but I could not adapt to Korean educational system and culture and everything... again I was going through a really difficult time in school and everything...I disliked everything in my life...especially I was so frustrated with my reality insecurely confused in between two different cultures—sense of estrangement from both cultures...I did not know who I am...and I felt I was empty...I totally gave up studying...my mom forced me to go to church...which is my home church...there are some folks that I know from my childhood...it was one of a few times of hanging around with folks from church when my conversion happened...we went to a CCM concert...in there when worship leaders sang about God's care and acceptance...I thought about God that I knew previously...and who I am before God... I prayed with a lot of tears...and then I just fell down before God...because He...He accepted me...As I told you I hated everything...myself, my situation, my environment...even God...I was alone but no one understood me and no one stretched his hands to me and no one took care of me...I became to know that God was there...only God alone stretched his hands to me and took care of me and understood...I felt like that... I newly found that God warmly approached to me and held my hands...He recognized me and He accepted me (Peggy, 3, 5-6).

I expected to hear many words of sin and repentance from the Respondents' conversion stories because I have understood conversion in a strong relationship with the theme of sin and repentance from my own conversion experiences, and theological studies and literature review of conversion. In addition, I assumed that the Respondents as the 1.5 KAS were influenced by a Revivalist-Evangelist understanding of conversion, which is prevalent in Korean and Korean immigrant Christian communities, and which strongly emphasizes on individual's sinfulness due to total depravity and the necessity of repentance for an individual's salvation. But I rarely heard the theme of sin and repentance from the Respondents and they were reluctant to accept such a theme. Instead, I heard many words of divine love and acceptance.

Traditional Theology Brings reluctance

The traditional theology of sin and repentance in the Korean immigrant church might make the 1.5 KAS, including the Respondents, reluctant to accept the theme of sin and repentance.³ In general, Korean immigrant churches have followed the conservative theological tradition from their homeland, which had been formed under the influence of American Evangelical missionaries. Stephen Warner points out that

Typical patterns pertain to Korean American congregations across denominational traditions and across regions in the United States. Korean American congregations are overwhelmingly conservative or “evangelical” in their theology.”⁴

In this sense, the theology of Korean immigrant churches in most cases is expected to be inspired by conservative evangelical theological thoughts, focusing on sin and repentance within personal conversion. As conservative churches, regardless of denominational affiliations, Korean immigrant churches largely admit and follow the Augustinian and Calvinistic understanding of sin as pride.

The 1.5 KAS resist the theme of sin and repentance particularly because of such a doctrine of *sin as pride*—too much self-worth; this understanding is incompatible with the experiences of the 1.5 KAS who come to their ethnic churches discouraged and with low self-esteem from their life experiences as the 1.5 generation. In this sense, the theme of sin and repentance does not sound reasonable or fair to the ears of the 1.5 KAS. It makes them reluctant or at least indifferent to the theme of sin and repentance and preferable to the theme of God’s acceptance and love.

Youth Ministry with the 1.5 generation Korean Americans

From the life and conversion stories of 1.5 KAS, I suggest some implications about how Christian education could support their conversion so that they could fully realize their true selves and potentials.

Agent of Hope

First, we, Christian educators, should be the agents of hope. I brought this imagery from Donald Capps’ book, *Agents of Hope*.⁵ In this book, Capps mainly maintains pastors should be ‘agents of hope,’ saying, “what pastors have uniquely to give

³ There could be more explanations for this such as gratification of psychological needs of 1.5 KAS by divine acceptance and love.

⁴ Stephen Warner and K.C. Kim eds. *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries from a Different Shore* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania University Press, 2001), 44.

⁵ Capps, Donald, *Agents of Hope: A Pastoral Psychology*. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2001.

others is hope...to be a pastor is to be a provider or agent of hope.”⁶ Since the 1.5 KAS have undergone tremendous sufferings which produce feelings of hopelessness, they need hope. The hope that they genuinely need is not only specific hopes for current problems but also, more ultimately, “the attitudinal hope” meaning “hopeful spirit toward life... [or] grounds for hope” for their entire future.⁷ In this sense, when taking care of their lives as the hope bearers, we need to help them not just to interpret their sufferings by seeking mere resolution of those but by developing hopeful spirits for their entire future. This implies that beyond just satisfying personal hopes, we should consider, plan, and practice social actions for the transformation of their life situations which have brought their difficulties. It means that we are to foster them to envision the Kingdom of God, the ultimate hope, in which all the evils such as marginalization, discrimination, and exclusion are conquered, in which all the tears and pains from loneliness, inferiority, and confusion are wiped out, and in which God’s justice is completely fulfilled (Rev 21:1-4). Since such a Kingdom of God as a true hope presupposes conversion (Matt. 4:17; John 3:5), fundamentally, it is foundational for us who are called to serve the 1.5 KAS to be agents of hope especially in the process of helping them to experience conversion.

The 1.5 Gatherings

Secondly, we need to provide the 1.5 KAS of their own 1.5 generation gatherings as the main educational context (hereafter “the 1.5 gatherings”), in which they practice resilience and hospitality for one another. I brought this imagery from N. Lynne Westfield’s “concealed gathering—that is to say, African American women coming together away from the ears and eyes of White folks and without the presence of African American men and the hospitality offered as an act of resilience in the gathering are acts of freedom, gestures of resistance and hope, and a practice of resilience,”⁸ shown in her book, *Dear Sisters*. Here, Westfield suggests from the Womanist perspective that Christian education should provide practices of hospitality which heal and renew African American women individually and communally in the midst of racism and dehumanization. Although not completely identical to the experiences of African American women, those of the 1.5 KAS are similar enough to those of them in the sense that the 1.5 KAS also have been located in the midst of racism and dehumanization from their experiences of being the 1.5 generation. In this sense, just as the “concealed gatherings” do for African American women, 1.5 gatherings would enhance their faith formation and growth in faith, as safe, comfortable, and welcoming spaces with genuine hospitality. Conversion experiences of the 1.5 KAS might be supported when they attribute and project to God their experiences of being loved, welcomed, and accepted within the 1.5 gatherings.

Sin and Conversion Reframed

⁶ Capps, 1.

⁷ Capps, 28.

⁸ N Lynne Westfield, *Dear Sisters: A Womanist Practice of Hospitality* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 34.

Thirdly, we should reframe the provocative theological concept of sin. On top of the message of salvation as acceptance and love, however, we need to include the concept of sin; the background notion that we are fallen creatures would make the message that “God can love even me” so powerful. But when Korean American churches teach the traditional Calvinist Augustinian concept of sin, it is not compatible with the life experiences of 1.5 KAS and thus does not work with this generation. Sin as “background noise” that constantly tells people “You’re no good!” needs to be changed to other concepts of sin with a better message such as separation from God or being lost. Even though the 1.5 KAS recognize the basic gospel that Christ saved them from their sins, as long as sin means pride or disobedience to God due to pride, this gospel does not encourage conversion. The Calvinist Augustinian simplification of “sin” as pride is only one understanding of sin; we need to teach a broader understanding of sin. We have to reframe the concept of sin as pride.

One useful concept can be borrowed the feminist understanding of sin which is a great hermeneutical tool to interpret sin for the vulnerable, discriminated, and oppressed, including 1.5 KAS. Christine Smith articulates sin as “internalization of [self] blame and guilt” which is induced from “demonic power structures.”⁹ In this sense, we need to take seriously the concept of sin as the systemic sin which makes individuals internalize such false identities with blame and guilt. With reframing the concept of sin and conversion through such a feminist understanding, we Christian educators can teach them that the true sin is to internalize such low-self esteem and inferior feeling and the true conversion is to resist such internalization individually and communally. We can teach them that they are neither unworthy nor inferior but they are truly worthy to be loved and accepted by God, enhancing their experience of God’s love and acceptance. We can teach that they do not need to blame themselves or to feel guilty about the difficulties that they have experienced. We can liberate them from self-blaming their low self-esteem and feeling of inferiority. We can help them to recognize that their environment of racism and discrimination are sinful.

Mentorship in the ecology of conversion

Finally, the education of conversion for the 1.5 KAS could be more effective if we take seriously the role of the “mentorship in the ecology of conversion.” I brought this imagery from Sondra Matthahei’s claim of the importance of “a Wesleyan ecology of faith formation,” in which “meaningful relationships with and instructions from mentors” can be provided.¹⁰ The role of mentorship looks significant within the 1.5 KA experiences as well, especially when it provides meaningful relationships and instructions with which one’s conversion experience is enhanced. Unfortunately, however, in 1.5 KA mentoring, 1.5 KA youths always outnumber pastors available for them, 1.5 KA youth pastors who can best serve them as their mentors. In this situation, we need to build a “mentoring

⁹ Christine M. Smith, “Sin and Evil in Feminist Thought,” *Theology Today* v 50 n.2 (July, 1993): 209, 210.

¹⁰ Sondra Higgins Matthahei, “Conversion: Possibility and Expectation,” from *Conversion in the Wesleyan Tradition* (Ed by Kenneth Collins and John Tyson; Nashville, KT: Abingdon, 2001), 208-209.

network,” in which we Christian educators become mentors for volunteer mentors; volunteer mentors, mentors for the groups comprised of older youth; and the groups, the mentoring groups for the younger youths. In such a mentoring network, we could bridge parents, volunteer mentors, and youths.

Practical Guidelines

1. Convince yourself of their potential in this global world
2. Maintain a welcoming and caring attitude
3. Build a reliable personal relationship
4. Have empathy
5. Never be judgmental
6. Listen to them
7. Do not forget to give pastoral care to them
8. Fully utilize the small group meeting
9. Follow up your students’ initial conversion experiences
10. Develop specific models of education for conversion
11. Plan and perform specific programs for education for conversion

Conclusion

This research totally changed my educational responses to their conversion. For the 1.5 KAS’ conversion, instead of merely pointing out their sinfulness and necessity of repentance, we should have enriched their experiences of God’s love and acceptance. We should have known that there are various true ways of experiencing conversion other than awareness of sin and repentance. We Christian educators need to take this aspect seriously in doing the ministry with them if we really want to them to fully realize their true selves and potentials.

References

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