



WHEATON COLLEGE GRADUATE SCHOOL

HUMANITARIAN DISASTER INSTITUTE

Chinese and Korean Congregations in Greater Washington D.C.

*Development and
Community Engagement*

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
MARCH 2024

SPONSORED BY DAO FENG AND ANGELA FOUNDATION

WELCOME

Welcome to the Study

Thank you for your interest in the Chinese and Korean Congregations Study. In an effort to serve these congregations in a practical way, this study provides insights about the status of Chinese and Korean churches in the greater Washington D.C. area, including staff and lay leaders, regular attendees, funds donated, volunteer projects, and other public engagement indicators. It also provides deeper insights about similarities and differences between Chinese and Korean congregations, and why they exist. These findings were drawn from a review of the literature on Chinese and Korean Christian churches in America, as well as the meanings and experiences of leaders and attendees of congregations as expressed in interviews. Finally, the report provides implications and recommendations, based on data collected, for Asian churches regarding their public engagement.

Acknowledgements

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With special gratitude, we would like to remember Mrs. Joy Trieglaff both for her service to this project and her many contributions to Wheaton College.

RESEARCH TEAM

This study was conducted as a part of the research program of the Humanitarian Disaster Institute, in its pursuit to help faith-based leaders to learn to do good better, together.

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Sample and Methodology

A team of researchers and assistants representing Chinese, Korean, and other cultures conducted this study, providing a mix of both emic and etic, that is cultural insider and outsider, perspectives. The qualitative phase of this project consisted of 42 semi-structured interviews with staff and lay leaders of Evangelical Protestant churches, conducted in four languages (English, Korean, Mandarin and Cantonese) over seven trips to the Washington D.C. area throughout 2022. In the quantitative phase, 109 individuals responded to the survey, also offered in four languages. These respondents were self-identified lay or staff leaders of Evangelical Protestant churches in the Washington D.C. area as well. We chose to keep surveys that were 75% or more completed, leaving a total of 63 observations.

In order to analyze the data, this study uses a mixed method design, with the qualitative and quantitative administered concurrently and with integrated results¹. In this study, qualitative transcriptions were coded according to inductive themes and self-described ethnic groups. Quantitative data was compared in descriptive format, according to the groups: Chinese, Korean and Other/Unknown.

Types of Congregational Cultural Models

The study revealed that congregations are represented along an array of ethnic groupings, rather than the dichotomous label of Chinese and Korean. The following is an attempt to describe the churches represented in the study.

CULTURAL ENCLAVES:

These congregations focus ministries toward a single ethnic group. For Korean congregations this would include ministry only in Korean, with the cultural practices and attendees primarily Korean as well.

DUAL OR MULTI-LANGUAGE:

These congregations run ministries concurrently in a language such as Mandarin as well as English. Within this model, there are great varieties of organization, from multiple services to two distinct congregations sharing a building.

HYBRID:

These congregations frame their ministry as global and inviting to all, while many of the practices of the congregation maintain a cultural basis, such as foodways, worship style, and leadership practices.

MULTI OR PAN-ASIAN:

These congregations represent a variety of Asian cultures, languages and ethnicities. Multi-Asian cultural churches would include and draw from several cultures represented within the congregation.

MULTICULTURAL:

Multicultural congregations represent both people and cultures from many contexts. According to previous congregational studies, multicultural churches are those where a second racial/ethnic/cultural group or two or more minority ethnic groups make up at least 20% with no one group making up 80% or more².



INTRODUCTION

Congregational life across the US is extremely multi-faceted and varied.

Immigrant churches may be some of the fastest growing and dynamic, yet their own situations are complex. And not all immigrant congregations are the same. This study was created primarily to inform and support frontline Christian Chinese and Korean leaders in the greater Washington D.C. area. These readers include pastors, staff, and lay leaders in congregations, as well as their partners in mission at parachurch ministries, philanthropic institutions, government agencies, community organizations, and more.

The findings in this executive report represent both typical and notable comments from the qualitative phase of this study, as well as select findings from the quantitative survey. The full report is scheduled for release in winter 2024.

CONTEXTUAL COMPARISONS

Chinese and Korean culture and the D.C. context influence the development of congregations



The Chinese label represents many languages and cultures.

Chinese culture is an umbrella term used for many groups, with vast language, socioeconomic, and education differences represented. For churches, this complicates the process and multiplies the possibilities of organizing.



Koreans are more likely to be Christians when they immigrate.

Koreans may draw from the religious tradition of their homeland and are more accustomed to Christianity, as well as denominationalism, in the United States.



Korean churches are more likely to be highly regarded in the general community.

Because of the historic influence of Christianity on South Koreans, many respect the church even if they do not participate.



Washington D.C. is described as a place of power, disparity, speed of life, and social justice opportunities.

Interviewees described the influence of the greater Washington D.C. culture as one where power was sought after and favored; where the privileged and marginalized co-exist; where families and individuals lived extremely busy and achievement-oriented lives; and finally, as a place of great opportunity to help others and advocate regarding social issues such as poverty and immigration.



Senior pastors were born outside the United States

According to survey responses, 100% of the senior pastors in the study were born outside the United States.

—

“We are the same church. We’re striving for something called *The One Church Model* and we’re trying to be people who are respectful of our elders while serving them, while also seeing blind spots that they might have so that the next generation can carry out that role, especially in an English speaking community.”

PASTOR OF KOREAN CONGREGATION



SHARED CHALLENGES

“I think the biggest challenge is to really develop the next generation of leaders to help our younger people take ownership of the church.”

PASTOR OF CHINESE CONGREGATION

Both Chinese and Korean congregations grapple with youth leaving the faith and mental health needs.

The exit of younger generations

Both Korean and Chinese churches are faced with the challenge of passing on their faith to the next generation. Key to these discussions are the issues of language, education, cultural hierarchies, and how current social and political issues are discussed.

In particular, language was described as: a deep bond or barrier to closeness, a fluid, ever-changing dynamic, and primary in establishing and growing relationships. Second-generation members will often leave churches quietly that they find “irrelevant, culturally stifling, and ill-equipped to develop them spiritually...”³. For many Koreans, this often meant starting or supporting a new church. In current times, it is likely that Korean and Chinese second-generation immigrants increasingly leave these churches and do not join another congregation.

Mental health is a pervasive need

Mental health challenges were among the most mentioned in this study, especially for youth. Leaders mention that the need carries negative stigma for the Asian-American community, thus it is less often discussed.

Meanwhile, depression and anxiety are on the rise. Between 2009-2019, American teenagers that experienced “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” rose from 26.1% to 36.7%. By 2021, that number reached 44.2%. Researchers also found that most anxiety disorders have developed by the age of 21, with the average age of developing such a disorder being 11⁴.

SHARED CHALLENGES

P.11



DEVELOPMENT OF CHURCHES

“We really try to think of giving or money more as a spiritual matter because it is connected to your heart. I think there’s a reason why Jesus shared so many parables about finances and money.”

PASTOR OF HYBRID CONGREGATION*

*A primarily second-generation Asian church that frames their ministry as inviting to all

Chinese and Korean churches differ in approaches to organizing

Asian churches organize in many ways, and are often more diverse than Chinese and Korean labels capture:

Interviewees described an array of church ethnicity models, from ethnic enclaves to multi-cultural congregations.

Korean churches follow the U.S.-style religious marketplace models:

Some U.S. versions of Christianity, including Korean churches, are known for following marketplace models, describing the competition that takes place as people make decisions about joining or changing churches, navigating church splits, or planting new churches. Chinese leaders did not mention these splits frequently.

Chinese congregants often belong to commuter churches:

Due to the affordability of real estate in the greater Washington D.C. area, more Chinese churches mentioned being located a good distance from their participants; these are known as commuter churches.

Korean churches continue in their exemplary commitment to prayer and missions:

Korean churches in the Washington D.C. area are continuing in the legacy of their Christian tradition by placing strong emphasis on ongoing prayer every day by members of the congregation.

Korean and Chinese churches are hesitant to discuss giving and finances.

While most church leaders avoid teaching and discussing finances, others teach the subject based on the chosen text being studied, and a few are eager to understand giving trends in their congregation in order to better connect with existing motivations.

With longer pastorates comes inertia:

Both Chinese and Korean pastors reported that after a long tenure in ministry, it becomes more difficult to make changes or to reimagine the organization of the church.

Generational patterns of leadership:

Pastors and leaders who come to the United States after escaping religious oppression often first lead house churches and informal faith gatherings. As time passes, these congregations join denominations or larger faith networks, and leaders engage in theological training. Those who are second or third generation immigrant leaders often attend seminary as a first step to leading.

Friendships fuel optimism

Pastors who have deep friendships and external professional networks reported seeing challenges more optimistically, and are eager to innovate.



Total annual income of Chinese and Korean churches

Income congregation received in most recent fiscal year (2021).

This past year, 50% of congregations (27/54) received \$500,000 or more in total income. 90% received \$100,000 or more in total income. About 27.8% (15/54) received \$1 million or more, while 7.4% (4/54) received less than \$25,000. Proportions do not include nine missing answers.

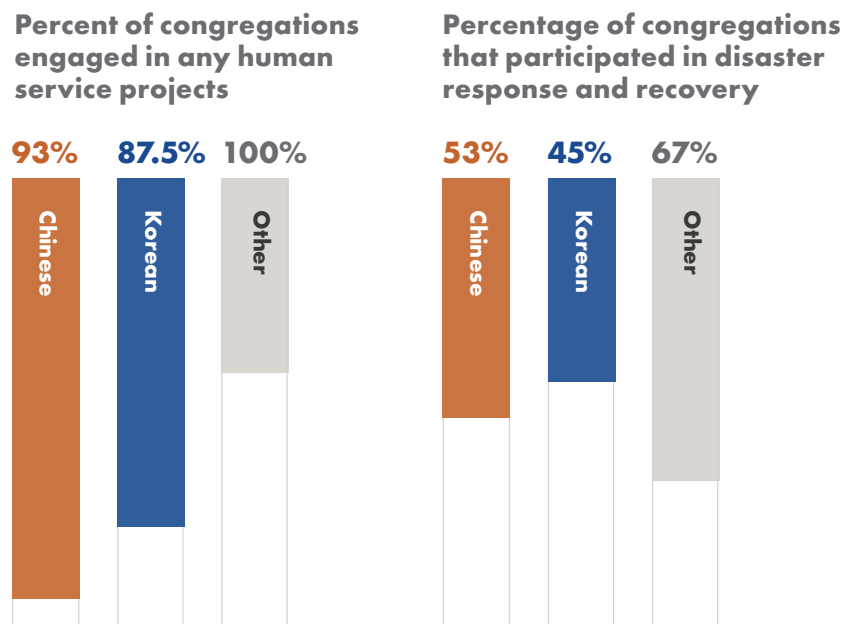
	Chinese	Korean
Less than \$5,000	0%	2.7%
Between \$5,000 and \$24,999	13.33%	2.7%
\$25,000 or more	0%	2.7%
\$100,000 or more	60%	32.43%
\$500,000 or more	20%	24.32%
\$1 million or more	6.67%	35.14%



“We want to be a church that people know that we’re here for them. We have things like benevolence where not only church members, where the community can actually apply and get some financial benefits when they’re in need. We work with a school right across the street.”

Most churches engage in activities intended to help the congregation and community*

* N=64 respondents.
Engagement data refers to how the church helped others within the last 12 months.



Hospitality and service are shared strengths for the Chinese and Korean churches

1

Asian-style hospitality has a strong presence in most churches

Both Chinese and Korean churches draw from the beautiful traditions of Asian hospitality, regular shared meals after church services, and time with family and friends as normal parts of their church traditions. This bonds the congregations in deep ways.

2

Community engagement can be transactional or transformational.

Interviewees described times when helping simply provided for material and spiritual needs. In other cases, the provision of help grew into long-term relationships that changed the lives of both the helpers and those who received help.

3

Chinese and Korean congregations serve their communities via distinct ministries, delegation to small groups, or community partnerships

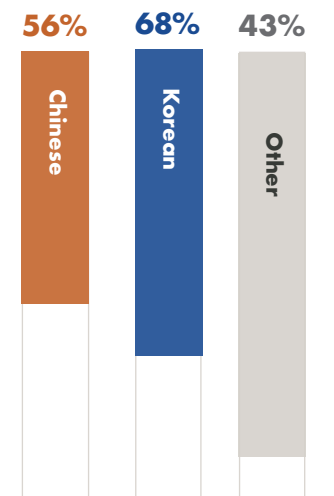
To serve the material and spiritual needs of internal and external communities, churches organize in these three main ways. Distinct ministries provide for easier coordination and control; small groups facilitate new relationships, broader reach, and shared ownership; and partnerships bring together diverse groups (who might not otherwise meet one another) around shared goals.

4

Congregational giving remained steady for many churches

Following national trends during the COVID-19 pandemic, churches remained stable in their habits of giving. In fact, some churches were in a stronger financial position due to the decrease in ministry costs. Other congregations, who were unable to provide giving opportunities online, did experience a decline. Churches in this study, overall, are hesitant to discuss giving regularly with their members.

Percentage of congregations that give to needs associated with their country of origin or immigrants from that country



RECOMMENDATIONS

According to the findings from the literature review and data from leaders of Chinese and Korean churches in the Washington D.C. area, the following recommendations are for staff and lay leaders of congregations.

1

Be keen observers of how language and culture are influencing relationships at the church. Encourage the development of cultural intelligence that can help others bond deeply and bridge generational and cultural differences.

2

Create or participate in an intentional system that identifies and grows young leaders as a key priority of the church.

3

Carefully consider if their location and facilities hinder or help their calling to a specific community of people.

4

Provide regular opportunities and biblical guidance for members to demonstrate love to one another across generations.

5

Develop a shared understanding of biblical mercy and justice, translating those concepts into modern terms which members can use in conversations and small groups, to build unity around otherwise divisive topics.

6

Steward and grow partners in the gospel and service locally, domestically, and internationally. Some partners will share the Christian faith, and others will share in the mission to help the community.

7

Gain understanding of the deep, broad impact of mental health issues, especially among youth. Set up systems of support that draw from evidence-based practices and biblical teaching.

8

Discuss the spiritual aspects of generosity on a regular basis. Encourage all members to grow to love giving as part of their spiritual disciplines.

9

Consider how those who are most gifted with generosity are being disciplined by the church. Do they have enough theological resources and spiritual support to excel in the grace of giving?

10

Meaningfully engage in a broader faith network beyond the local congregation.

11

For pastors and staff, make friends with other pastors in similar contexts with whom they regularly meet, to encourage one another and share ideas.

12

For churches that are thriving, consider how to include and support other immigrant congregations of the greater Washington D.C. area.

Recommended Resources

The following are a small selection of many quality resources available for Chinese and Korean Christian leaders.

ACADEMIC RESOURCES

1. Lee, D. D. (2022). *Doing Asian American Theology: A Contextual Framework for Faith and Practice*. InterVarsity Press.

This book connects Asian American identity to faith and theology, as well as providing a method for theologies in their ethnic, generational and regional differences.

2. Fulton, B. R., & King, D. P. (2018). *National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices: Bloomington: Indiana University*. Accessed at: www.nscep.org

This study provides a U.S. nationally representative overview of how congregations receive, manage and spend their financial resources.

3. Edwards, K.R. and Kim, R. (2024) *Estranged Pioneers: Race, Faith and Leadership in a Diverse World*. New York: Oxford University Press.

This book draws from 121 in-depth interviews to understand what it means for African American and Asian American pastors to head multiracial churches.

4. "The Asian American Movement and the Church," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 25:1 (February 2022): 63-95.

This article considers the social activism of Protestant Christians at the time of the Asian American Movement of the late 1960s.

5. Warner, S., & Wittner, J. G. (Eds.). (1998). *Gatherings in diaspora: Religious communities and the new immigration*. Temple University Press.

Considered a classic in religious studies literature, this book includes chapters on both Korean and Chinese experiences.

LEADERSHIP RESOURCES

1. Fuller Youth Institute <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/multicultural> - These resources aim to equip diverse Christian leaders and parents "so faithful young people can change our world."

2. Spiritual First Aid <https://www.spiritualfirstaid.org> - This curriculum teaches staff and lay leaders evidence and biblically-informed basics to help others with mental health needs.

3. Mental Health Summit - <https://www.churchmentalhealthsummit.com> - This conference equips local churches to support mental health in their communities, congregations, and leaders.

4. Generous Giving - generousgiving.org. This website provides resources and a video library aimed at "exploring Jesus-like" generosity.

5. Nation, H., & Liu, S. (2022). *Faith in the Wilderness: Words of Exhortation from the Chinese Church*. Lexham Press.

This collection of nine sermons from urban house church pastors in China offers courage for Asian churches across the world.

ENDNOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Leech, N. L., & Onwuegbuzie, A. J. (2009). A typology of mixed methods research designs. *Quality & quantity*, 43, 265-275.

2. Please see The National Study of Congregations' Economic Practices - <https://www.nscep.org/>

3. Lee, J. Y. (1995). *Marginality: The key to multicultural theology*. Fortress Press. Quote from page 50.

4. Please see Fuller Institute's article - <https://fulleryouthinstitute.org/blog/mental-health-friendly-youth-ministry>

Thank you
for reading.

읽어 주셔서 감사합니다
谢谢阅读
謝謝閱讀





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