New Immigrant Christianity

Summary: *The Immigration Act of 1965 allowed greater numbers of Asian, African, and Hispanic immigrants to enter into the U.S. These communities transformed the American religious landscape, bringing their own forms of worship and expression. One resulting physical change has been the emergence of "nesting churches," buildings that house multiple congregations with different ethnic and religious identities.*

The Immigration Act of 1965 brought Asian, African, and Hispanic populations to the United States in unprecedented numbers. The act replaced an older quota system that heavily favored European immigrants with a more open system that prioritized skilled labor and family connections. This new immigration is now playing an important role in the ongoing realignment of American Christianity. There are many innovative patterns of congregational life, for example, with English-speaking and Chinese-speaking congregations meeting in the same building for common fellowship and separate worship services. There are a multitude of "nesting" churches—more established English-speaking congregations that host more recent congregations and fellowship groups that might worship in Vietnamese, Spanish, or Haitian Creole. And large "mainline" denominations, like the United Methodist Church, have active African-American, Hispanic, Native American, and Asian-American caucuses that articulate for the whole church the concerns of its minority communities and call the churches to a more inclusive fellowship.

The churches of Boston, to cite one example, give visible evidence of the increasing diversity of American Christianity. Iglésia Bautista Hispanoamericana de Boston (Hispanic-American Baptist Church of Boston) has met in the basement of the historic Tremont Baptist Temple in downtown Boston, representing one example of Tremont Temple's mission as "the International Church." Frontier Church, a largely Korean congregation that is part of the Evangelical Covenant Church founded by Swedish immigrants in 1885, has met in a Holiday Inn. A Baptist church in Cambridge has hosted a Bengali congregation near Central Square and a local congregation of the Church of the Nazarene has shared its space with two others, one Haitian and another Portuguese.

Many of the more recent communities of American Christians are building on the foundations laid by earlier immigrants. Today there is a new awareness of a much older diversity in American Christianity.

Protestant home missionaries laid the foundation for Chinese-American churches among Chinese workers in California in the 1860s, and Japanese Protestantism dates back to the 1870s with the founding of a Gospel Society in San Francisco.

The explosive growth of Korean Protestant churches in the United States is a phenomenon that can be observed in every major city. The first Korean churches in North America are over one hundred years old, established by immigrant workers who came to Hawaii at the turn of the 20th century. Although Korean Christian immigrants to the U.S. might be Presbyterian, Methodist, or Petecostal, they have also brought with them a distinctly Confucian emphasis on "filial piety," the moral obligations of children toward their parents. This filial piety is an important factor in Korean-American Christian identity, having been passed down from the first generation to the second and beyond.

Filipinos, the majority of whom are Roman Catholics, also started coming to Hawaii and then the mainland U.S. in the first decade of this century. Most of their churches bore the stamp of American missions. Today, however, as churches around the world are leaving the European mission heritage behind and expressing the Gospel in the languages, music, and arts of their own cultures, the new immigrants of these churches are bringing this cultural diversity to American Christianity.

All across America, there are innovative kinds of ministries, ministers, and congregations. In San Jose, California, for example, San Jose Community Church reaches out to the Vietnamese immigrant population by offering courses instructing the next generation in Vietnamese culture. The church also hosts the Vietnamese Christian Resource Center, an online collection of literature, music, and educational resources.

The Hmong Central Lutheran Church in Minneapolis and the Holy Trinity Lutheran Church's Swahili-speaking ministry in St. Paul both reflect the large immigrant and refugee populations in the Twin Cities region. Denominational leadership has also begun to reflect these changes: in 1995, Bea Vue Benson became the first Hmong woman ordained as a minister in her denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

The implications of this new Christian diversity can be seen in the new hymnals published by each of the major Protestant denominations. For example, the United Methodist Hymnal (1989) contains hymns from India and Taiwan, words in Spanish and English, and traditional music from the Muscogee Creek Nation . “Jesus Loves Me” alone is printed in German, Spanish, Cherokee and Japanese.

Some large urban Roman Catholic parishes, like St. Jerome’s in Chicago’s Rogers Park neighborhood, have Spanish and English services, reflecting demographic shifts in the area. Further south, in Chicago’s Pilsen neighborhood, the St. Pius parish, formerly composed of Polish-speakers, has become a largely Hispanic congregation active in organizing around issues related to immigration policy. While there have been voices in the Catholic Church urging the elimination of “ethnic” parishes in favor of neighborhood parishes, other Catholics insist on the importance of structures that preserve distinct cultures and identities.

In Miami, FL, Notre Dame d’Haiti Catholic Church, founded in 1981, recently expanded to accommodate the growing number of parishioners. In a 2011 CBS local interview, the Reverend Jean Mary described the parish as “more than a church. [It’s] a lifeline community center.” As for many immigrant communities, Haitians find Notre Dame d’Haiti to be not only a spiritual home and place to worship, but also a place where they can find practical help in a new country and maintain bonds with their homeland. In the aftermath of the earthquake that devastated Haiti in January 2010, the church served as a gathering place for Haitians in Miami to comfort one another and organize relief efforts. As with previous generations of immigrants, the church home is often the strongest center of identity in a land where they are a small minority.

As the next generations of this new and diverse Christian population find their way in churches across the United States, American Christianity will continue to produce new patterns of expression. The future of Christianity in America will be undoubtedly shaped by the streams and currents of its great racial and ethnic diversity.