

# Faith-Based Community Support for Korean American Older Adults

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*This study used a phenomenological approach for data collection and analysis based on interviews with 20 Korean immigrants, the first generation, aged 55 and older, on faith-based community support for these elders. Interviews began with a series of open-ended questions presented in an informal conversational style. Informants were asked to respond to questions on life challenges, support networks, and their coping styles. Major themes that emerged from the data, were 1) Religious Practice, 2) Faith-based Community as Social Capital, 3) Spiritual Needs, 4) Meaning of Suffering, and 5) Challenges and Conflicts. The data suggested that religious and spiritual practices such as prayer, worship and fellowship positively reinforce feelings of connectedness and healthy behaviors among elderly Korean immigrants. A best practice model for outreach, education, and prevention for mental health services that includes collaboration between social workers and clergy is suggested.*

**L**ITTLE IS KNOWN ABOUT FAITH-BASED COMMUNITY SUPPORT AMONG ethnic minority elderly populations. Meaning and purpose in life, religious involvement, religious coping, congregational support, and spiritual practices are widely recognized as predictors of well-being in later life (Bramadat & Biles, 2005; Koenig, McCullough, Larson, 2001). Among adults in the United States (U.S.), identifying with a faith system has been shown to buffer the stress associated with health disparities, and religiosity and spirituality have been found to be prominent factors in health status and subjective well-being among African Americans and other ethnic minorities (Taylor, Chatters, & Levin, 2004).

According to the Religious Landscape Survey (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2010), immigration, along with factors like age, race, and geography, is contributing in a major way to changes in religious affiliation in the U.S. While scholars have suggested that religion and ethnicity

are often intertwined and frequently mutually reinforcing, there has been little research on the intersection between religion and ethnicity (Ebaugh & Pipes, 2001; Goldschmidt & McAlister, 2004).

The U.S. Census Bureau (2012) has reported that Americans with Asian and Pacific Islander (API) heritage now account for 17.3 million of all non-institutionalized persons; 8.1% (1.4 million) of these individuals are 65 years and older (Administration on Aging, 2009). By 2050, the population of API elderly is projected to make up 6.3% of the elderly U.S. population, up from 1.8% in 1995 (Reeves & Bennett, 2004). Although currently ranked as only the fourth largest API subgroup, Korean Americans are one of the fastest growing segments of immigrants (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

South Korea (referred as Korea henceforth) has one of the most dynamic and diverse religious cultures. Christians share the Korean religious landscape with Buddhists, Shamans, Confucians, and practitioners of numerous other religions. However, while approximately 25% of Koreans profess the Christian faith in Korea, among those who migrate to the U.S., this figure rises to 50% and, once landed, affiliation rises to 75 to 80% (Min & Kim, 2002; Warner, 2001). It is quite common that people who were not Christians before become churchgoers after they arrive in America. Further, according to the National Public Radio/Kaiser/Kennedy School's Immigration Survey (2004), immigrants in the US are more likely than nonimmigrants (47% and 22%, respectively) to say that one must believe in the Christian God to be part of American society. Many immigrants, including Korean Americans, perceive a church as a place where people become acculturated to the American culture.

Most Korean immigrant churches in America are small, with 40 to 60 members, and are becoming far more minister-centered in ecclesiastical structure (Alumkal, 2000). Churchgoers attended worship regularly, over a quarter of them were donating more than \$5000 a year to the church, and they were highly focused in their church involvement (Ecklund, & Park, 2005). Korean immigrant churches in North America tend to endorse a very conservative theological orientation (Kwon, Kim, & Warner, 2001; Yang, & Ebaugh, 2001). Kim and Kim (2001) found that in response to the biblical questions on the existence of heaven and hell, existence of Satan, the virgin birth, and the return of Christ, 87% of respondents gave the most conservative answer to indicate their unconditional belief in biblical doctrines.

Many immigrants transfer their conservative religious faith from the Korean church in Korea to Korean immigrant churches in America, adopting theological belief, worship styles, and church structures. For example, the church leadership is male-dominated, although a large majority of church members are women. Because of this cultural transfer, the male-dominated leadership is characterized by its patriarchal and hierarchical culture. However, there are also unique challenges that Korean churches

in Korea do not have, but only Korean immigrant churches face, such as a struggle between the first generation (Korean-speaking) and the second generation (English-speaking), a struggle against racism, a struggle with the myth of “model minority,” and others (Min & Kim, 2002; Warner, 2001).

Research on volunteering, charitable giving, and civic participation has confirmed that religious affiliation is a strong predictor of all three of these indicators of social capital (Mayer, 2003). However, interestingly, one of the downsides of the Korean immigrant congregation is a lack of outward orientation concerning issues of larger society, and budgets for the community services within Korean immigrant churches were quite limited (Shin, 2002). A daunting challenge of Korean immigrant churches is to lead transformation from co-ethnic bonding to cross-ethnic bridging social capital, which involves engagement with difference, a commitment to multiculturalism that requires considerable movement beyond a cultural comfort zone (Ley, 2008).

In spite of the popular image of the “model minority,” Asian American elderly experience numerous challenges in communicating mental health problems, accessing health care services, and obtaining formal and informal social support (Sue, Zane, Hall, & Berger, 2009; Takeuchi, et al., 2007). One study of older Korean immigrants showed that those with lower levels of acculturation had more depressive symptoms (Jang, Kim, & Chiriboga, 2005). Yet Korean immigrant families experience strong feelings of family shame and social stigma associated with mental health problems. For this reason, many Korean immigrants delay seeking help until they are in a state of crisis. Korean immigrants with emotional problems are likely to turn to mental health services only as a last resort, preferring to first seek assistance from family and friends, informal social networks, and the Korean immigrant churches.

Even though Korean immigrant churches are recognized as the first place for Korean immigrants to seek the help, there are not many pastors who are trained to provide qualified pastoral care to support the emotional problems of Korean immigrants. Also, few social workers are fully aware of this tendency for reluctance that Korean immigrants have. Service providers’ lack of understanding of the contribution of Eastern cultural values to these elders’ mental health exacerbates the problems of access to services and reduces the efficacy of mental health services.

Incorporating qualitative interviews with 20 Korean Americans aged 55 and older, this study explored the meaning of faith-based community and support in an immigrant elderly population going through many life transitions such as migratory grief, acculturation, and adjustment to new roles in the family and community.

## Methods

The study used a phenomenological approach to explore the manner in which spiritual resources are utilized by the first generation Korean immigrant elders (Creswell, 2003). Another aim is to clarify the meaning of religion and spirituality for Korean immigrant elders and the process of religious/spiritual coping for Korean immigrant older adults (Padgett, 2004). In collaboration between a social worker and a clergy/practical theologian, this paper is intended to enhance our understanding of these aspects of Korean immigrant congregations and to suggest best practices.

The 20 interviews began with a series of open-ended questions presented in an informal conversational style. Informants were asked to respond to general questions on life challenges, support networks, and their coping styles. Specific questions were then asked about their religion, their image of God, faith-based communities, and spiritual aspects of coping with difficulties. The interviews were all audio-taped and lasted from one to three hours, depending on how informants chose to reveal their experiences.

Analysis of the data included a review of the transcripts and field notes to identify repeated statements and themes found in the data. The data were then coded into meaning units, and collapsed into categories that fit together to form patterns that reveal pertinent information related to religious/spiritual coping (Creswell, 2003). Through this method of analysis it is possible to gain further insight relevant to the concept of religious/spiritual coping and its relationship to social support from the respondents' point of view.

## Results

Major themes that emerged from the data, were 1) Religious Practice, 2) Faith-based Community as Social Capital, 3) Spiritual Needs, 4) Meaning of Suffering, and 5) Challenges and Conflicts.

### Religious Practices

Traditional Asian religions do not put as much emphasis on weekly service attendance as do Judeo-Christian religions. However, Christian traditions give Korean immigrants an opportunity to gather regularly and share a life together through church programs and activities on a weekly basis. The Korean immigrant church helps the process of forming Korean immigrant communities by providing a source of solidarity, in addition to their common ethnicity, on which to build relationships. A lack of fellowship in the immigrant community may lead even non-Christian Korean immigrant elderly to seek religious organizations that meet their need for their ethnic cohesion in the U.S. In this sense, religious practices and

institutions appear to be the lynchpin that holds together most Korean immigrant communities.

The Korean immigrant church, which is fairly homogeneous in terms of ethnic makeup, usually adheres to the rituals of Christianity (e.g., prayer, meditation, reading the Bible, saying grace before meals, and revival seminar/meetings) in Korea. Their faith traditions appeared to help these Korean immigrants deal with the upheavals of immigration and adapt to a new country and difficult personal and social transformation by providing a safe and comfortable environment in which the immigrants could socialize, share information, and assist each other. A 68-year-old woman who had lived in the U.S. over 35 years stated:

Because of the church, I have survived. The church is my life. I miss Korea and the life in Korea sometimes. I miss my [extended] family. When I go to church, I get some comfort. I sense the smells of Korean food, and I hear laughing and talking in Korean. I am surrounded by Koreans. It is like home. The church is my second home.

Another 65-year-old woman who immigrated to the U.S. 35 years ago agreed:

What a privilege to worship in Korean in America! I can still worship my God in America. I visited other American churches sometimes to learn some American styles of worship and culture. However, when I want to worship, I come to my immigrant church. Some people come to the church not for worship but for social gathering. Sometimes it bothers me. Some of them are not Christians. They just want to come to the church for fellowship. I know. However, not all of them come to the church just for that. Moreover, I believe as they come, they will meet God.

### **The Faith-Based Community as Social Capital**

In addition to religious guidance, faith-based communities in immigrant communities provide ethnic, cultural, and linguistic reinforcements, along with a protective refuge (Min & Kim, 2005). The immigrant church offers a constructive site for the accumulation of social capital and the provision of individual and social services. Shared life experiences (e.g., faith, language, ethnicity, region of origin, and time of arrival) and similar everyday concerns (e.g., language barriers) create a tightly networked collective identity and provision of services of various kinds from a significant treasury of social capital. The ethnic congregation, fortified by new immigrant cohorts, represents a significant achievement in creating social capital.

Korean immigrant churches serve as the social center and a means of cultural identification for Korean immigrants in America and as the place that keeps Korean ethnic identity alive. The function of the church in providing an ethnic identity is one of the biggest draws of Christianity for Korean immigrant older adults. It greatly affects the process of community formation for them as well. Korean immigrants feel accepted like insiders in the church instead of like outsiders in mainstream American society. A 71 year-old man who had lived in the U.S. for 37 years reported:

When I was in Korea, I was a high school teacher. However, when I got here, I was nobody. People did not like me. They did not understand me when I spoke. I was invisible. My education was useless. I worked for the factory. I hated it. I quit the job and set up my own small business. For many years, I wanted to go back to Korea. However, I knew I could not go back then. My comfort was my church. The church saved me. When I was in the church, I was somebody. People recognized me. They liked me. They respected me. I forgot that I was in America.

Korean immigrants' presence is recognized and their participation in the church is valued and appreciated. This recognition enables Korean immigrants to affirm their existence in America and encourages their collective identity and ethnic pride, without shame in relation to racism in the U.S.

The church nourishes Korean ethnic identity and creates a special bond among Korean immigrants. Since many Korean immigrants, especially elderly first generation immigrants, face underemployment due to their lack of English fluency (especially if they come from educated and professional backgrounds in Korea), they often feel ashamed, embarrassed, or alienated as they adjust to their lower status level in the U.S. (Min & Kim, 2002). Within their church, many Korean immigrants find status through official positions inside the church (e.g., as elders, deacons, and committee chairs, etc.) The Korean church thus gives Korean American immigrants opportunities for leadership, a sense of belonging, and resources to help individuals overcome deficiencies in social status.

Not surprisingly, many Korean American elders go to church for fellowship, maintenance of cultural tradition, social services, and social status and position. In almost all Korean-American congregations, the most essential church activity is congregational meals, followed by the service on Sunday. Since churches are social institutions as well as religious ones, the ethnic factor seems to predominate in determining people's place of worship. Korean immigrants tend to be more pragmatic than theoretical. In other words, they are not very concerned about whether or not a particular program is theologically or denominationally correct so long as it fulfills the desired purpose. A 78-year-old man who lived in the U.S. for 23 years said:

I was a Catholic, but now I go to the protestant church. It is different, but I like this church. People are nice. They help me to come to the church every week. Now I am old. I cannot drive. They give me a ride sometimes. Some women from the church make food and share it with me. They treat me well.

Another 59-year-old woman who had been in the U.S. for 26 years agreed:

I was a Methodist before. After I came to America, I participated in a Presbyterian church. When I moved here, many people from the church helped me. They took me to get a driver's license, and a social security number. They helped me to find a school for my kids. They gave me all furniture and even chopsticks. Without their help, I could not survive.

Many Korean immigrant churches not only serve a religious role but also help in the process of acculturation by meeting immigrants' physical and psychological needs. Some churches provide their members with services for dealing with practical, everyday matters. In fact, in many cases, the Korean immigrant church provides business and financial advice, political-legal services related to citizenship, education on Korean culture, and even health services (Kwon, Kim, & Warner, 2001; Lee, 2007). Korean churches are also known to be the place to receive translation assistance and information relating to employment, housing, marriage, parenting, and many other such concerns.

Along with these services, churches have formed monthly social clubs to enable immigrants to be with other seniors with whom they can feel comfortable socializing. In keeping with the East Asian value of filial piety, most Korean immigrant churches have a group for older adults. Many churches provide special programs such as annual free health services, special church worship services for the senior group, and community life programs. A 68-year-old women who had lived the U.S. for 34 years said:

Our church provides a monthly program for elderly people. My minister takes our elderly group for tour. Every month, we go to the state park or some nice places. After we finish the tour, my minister usually takes us to a nice restaurant. It is so nice for a day trip. Because we are old, it is hard to go some places, but our church provides such a great opportunity for us to visit a nice place. They care about our loneliness.

Because of older adults' limited mobility and health difficulties, in many cases they depend on congregational services and church members.

Hence, the secular functions of this social institution are just important as the religious functions, if not more important in helping Korean immigrants in their everyday lives. The Korean immigrant church becomes thus the main center of social immigrant life.

### **Spiritual Needs**

In order to better adjust to American life, Korean immigrant elderly need to meet their spiritual needs and psychological support at the same time. Their needs to find a place to replenish their spiritual thirst are no substitute for other social and cultural needs. Sometimes, Korean immigrants' spiritual quest is misunderstood as a psychological defense mechanism, and social or practical needs are substituted for spiritual needs. However, it is important to remember that their spiritual needs are the ultimate addition to other activities of their immigrant lives. The fulfillment of their deep spiritual needs itself helps Korean immigrants to live the American life with more confidence and encouragement.

The Korean immigrant church community can provide a safe and comfortable environment psychologically and even physically. Especially for older adults, the church may be the only place that they go to and engage with others. It gives them an opportunity to socialize and share life together with their peers outside of their home. Their spiritual fellowship releases their anxiety and fear of living in America, and provides comfort and relief as well as encouragement and hope to live in America.

One distinctive Korean spiritual practice is their style of prayer. It is called unified vocal prayer (*t'ongs ng kido*). Although not uniformly practiced, this form of prayer is commonly known and practiced in the Protestant church (Lee, 2010) in Korea as well as in America. When they pray in their gatherings, especially during weekly early morning services, they prefer to pray out loud, contrary to the cultural norm of not speaking about family problems to strangers. Each person raises his or her voice to God, usually following the lead of a pastor or lay leader who is at the front, making known the prayer concerns. A 72-year-old woman who had lived in the U.S. over 45 years confessed:

Because of prayer, I could live. I prayed every morning and evening. Without prayer, how could I live my life? God listened to me and always answered my prayer. When I had a hard time with my family in America, I cried and cried while I prayed. I spoke to God loud and asked help. God answered me through my prayer and gave me peace. God gave me wisdom to solve the problem and sent me a person to help. Even though the problems of my family were not completely resolved, we knew that God had another door to open for us.



No research has examined how much unified vocal prayer releases people's anxiety and stress. Yet many Christians who participate in early morning services or any prayer meetings share similar patterns of expression, whether this was a unified vocal prayer or a silent prayer. They deeply trust that God listens and answers their prayers. God gives them peace and wisdom to take care of their concerns. Even if their situations are the same, they have positive attitudes toward their lives despite their difficulties. The experience of prayer itself brings a transformative energy for people to live on their life. Whether they experience God directly in their prayers or they experience some kind of enlightenment through prayers, meditation, or reflection, they change their attitude toward life and try to release their stress. Not only the experience of prayer, but also the experience of church life can lead Korean immigrants to have hope for a better life in the future and keep a positive attitude toward their current situations.

### **The Meaning of Suffering**

One of the most valued elements of the Korean immigrant church as a religious institution is providing comfort about suffering. Many elderly Korean immigrants face challenges about health and mortality. To illustrate, they have a particularly hard time adjusting in the hospital. Physical suffering itself is challenging, but adjusting in an American hospital is another challenge. Without proper translation and personal care in the hospital, they often rely on church members and informal social supports. An 83-year-old woman who had lived in the U.S. for 46 years explained:

I like American food. However, when I was sick in the hospital, I could not eat American food. I really missed Korean food. Kimchi. Rice. Korean styles of cooked vegetables. I could not stay there. I did not understand what they said. My pastor translated it for me. However, he could not be there all the time. My church members helped me out. They visited me every day. That gave me comfort.

On the other hand, they seek to find meaning in suffering and mortality and want to have comfort from God by requesting pastoral visits and worship services. A 69-year-old woman who had been in the U.S. for 28 years confessed:

I am scared. The doctor said I had less than six months. I do not know what God wants from me now. My minister comes to see me very often. He leads a worship service for me. I talk about my death with him sometimes. He said God would be with me. He tried to give me a hope to live. He prayed that God would heal me...but I am scared. I am

in pain. I know everyone dies. I know I will go heaven and God will be there with me. Jesus will be there with me. But I am scared.... My church members visit me every day. We talk. We cry. I am so loved by people in the church. They pray for me every day.

In dealing with physical pain and psychological fear, elderly Korean immigrants try to have faith in God in their life journey. They read the Bible, pray, and listen to sermons to seek the meaning in suffering. They lean on their clergy and their teachings to figure out the meaning of life and death. However, few clergy persons are trained to provide proper pastoral counseling and spiritual direction. Sometimes, because of the Korean clergy's conservative orientation and lack of training, the clergy may easily dismiss lay people's questions, concerns, and doubts. Rather, they emphasize enduring suffering and obeying God without complaints.

### **Challenges and Conflicts**

Our observations and interviews revealed that informants had very high expectations that the Korean congregation would be a place of healing for these who have been hurt emotionally by family members, migratory stress, and downward social mobility. However, we also discovered that the church was a place where they got hurt and frustrated because of their conflicts among church members, between church members and the clergy, between the first generation and the second generation, and between patriarchal church leadership and women's leadership. Many elderly Korean immigrants tend to stay in their own church that they have served for many years and where they want to spend the rest of their lives. However, a territorial leadership style of both the clergy and lay leaders often fails to welcome new kinds of leadership by second generation offspring, women, divorcees, and low-income families. Their hierarchical culture has been preserved and deeply embedded in the Korean immigrant church. That is one of the most difficult and complex problems that Korean immigrants struggle with among themselves in the Korean immigrant church.

One of the most critical challenges that the Korean immigrant church has faced from the outside of its ethnic boundary is its lack of interest toward other racial groups. However, it does not mean they do not reach out to other racial groups outside of America. With growing interest in world missions, more than 50,000 Korean immigrants have participated in short-term international mission trips in recent decades (Lee, 2010). Some elderly Korean immigrant Christians in this study said that they wanted to go on a long-term mission trip right after they retired in order to share what they had received. A 59-year-old medical doctor who had lived in the U.S. for 23 years reported:

I did short-term international mission trips several times. Some of our church members gave indigenous people in Latin America medical help and dental help. Others helped them with education. My team and I were there to build a well and a school for them. Our church has this program for many years. Each year, we go there and help them. I am so glad our church reaches out.

Even though many Korean immigrant churches use mission trip programs as a way to reach out to the world, relatively few efforts have been made to reach out to the local community or other ethnic communities to build bridges between different races within American society. Perhaps short-term mission trip programs are relatively comfortable for them to reach out to towns outside of America without breaking their cultural comfort zone, while commitment to multiculturalism in America requires constant efforts and considerable sensitivities, as a way of living together. Especially for elderly first generation Korean immigrants who grew up in an ethnically homogeneous culture back in South Korea, the use of English and the psychological predicament of acculturation are critical barriers to cross-ethnic bridge building. Even though lack of interest or indifference toward other ethnic communities is one of Korean immigrants' ethnic stereotypes, much more in-depth immigrant studies are needed, considering the multilayers of dynamics between race, sex/gender, class, and postcolonial influence.

### **Discussion**

The process of social integration brings conflict between adapting to the American lifestyle and preserving a distinct cultural, religious, and ethnic identity (Goldschmidt & McAlister, 2004). This observational study shows how religious and spiritual practices such as prayer, church worship, and fellowship create positive reinforcement for Korean immigrant elderly to feel connected and stay healthy. Because these elderly immigrants have come from a collectivistic society in South Korea, they are used to having a close social network and the support that comes with it. Probably the most important reason for the existence of Korean immigrant congregations in America in addition to their core religious purpose may be the sense of community they can provide.

Limited English-speaking ability and low educational levels of many older Korean Americans make it critical that social services for them involve the Korean faith-based community, which can effectively reach these elderly persons (Takeuchi, et al., 2007). Providing access to religious resources and respecting clients' needs to connect with their faith-based and ethnic community are important. Hence, outreach to and collaboration with clergy-persons can be an essential tool in increasing the efficacy of services

and accessing the inherent strengths and resilience of the Korean immigrant community. Higher education systems to train clergy and lay leaders should strengthen their curriculum to enhance pastoral care and spiritual direction. Mental Health First Aid, a public education program designed to educate people in the church to identify, understand, and respond to signs of mental illnesses and substance use disorders, can be a great resource (National Council for Community Behavior Healthcare, 2009).

At the same time, faith-based organizations can be an important vehicle to outreach for those who are reluctant to seek formal mental health services on their own, outside of their families. Social workers can provide education and workshops about mental health care and family counseling at the churches. Clergy and spiritual leaders in the community can serve as primary referrals as well as gatekeepers to community mental health services. Collaboration between Korean immigrant clergy and social workers can be mutually beneficial in connecting service delivery systems. Through counseling, social workers can support healthy religious behaviors that clients find helpful in coping with difficult life challenges (such as, immigration, migratory grief, adaptation to a new culture, and other difficult life transition).

While maintaining a Korean ethnic identity, the Korean immigrant church should reach out to other ethnic racial communities and their ministries should give more attention to strengthen their relationship to local community development. In this process, volunteer activities and civic engagement in the local communities should be strongly encouraged by the clergy and included in the church's regular programs. Social workers can help by providing lists of volunteer opportunities or organizing various aspects of community service within the congregation. The bonding and social capital so abundantly present in Korean immigrant congregations must be painstakingly used as bridging capital to embrace diverse groups in a pluralistic society. Social workers need to find a way intentionally to work with church leaders together to address the issue of inclusiveness within the Korean immigrant church. ❖

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