
LEADERSHIP IN A CHANGING TRANSNATIONAL CONTEXT: WITH A CASE STUDY OF KOREAN-SPEAKING YOUNG ADULTS IN KOREAN IMMIGRANT CHURCHES

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Abstract

In the rapidly changing context of globalization, contemporary Christian leaders face many new challenges. One of most important changes for leaders to navigate is the increasingly multicultural nature of American society due to international migration. Interactions across different cultures are usually complicated, but recent changes brought about by contemporary migrants have deepened the complexities. Contemporary immigrants tend to maintain stronger links to their home country through the Internet, phones, mass media, and accessible transportation, even as they assimilate into their hosting country. This adds another layer of complexity to the task of understanding and leading communities with people from different cultures. In this changing context with a growing number of migrants, leaders in Christian communities should understand how God is already working in order to be properly equipped to lead his people to participate in God's work.

Background of This Study: Why It Is Important

International Migration and U.S Context

We are living in “the age of migration.”¹ Few societies are an exception to this rule. According to the Migration Policy Institute, international migrants numbered more than 231 million worldwide in 2013. The Pew Research Center reported that the sheer number of international migrants

¹ Cf. Stephen Castles and Hein de Hass, *The Age of Migration: International Population Movements in the Modern World*, 5th ed., (New York: Guilford Press, 2009).

has never been higher.² However, defining who is a migrant is not an easy task. Koser points out that because the concept of *migrant* covers a wide range of people in a wide variety of situations, it is hard to count migrants accurately and to determine how long they have been abroad. In addition, given the difficulties involved in defining when a person becomes a migrant or ceases being a migrant, determining who is and is not a migrant becomes complicated.³ However, to start our conversation on leadership in the context of international migration, we will simply adopt the United Nations' definition of *migrants*, agreeing that not only long-term but also short-term migrants can impact sending and receiving countries. The UN defines as an international migrant a person who stays outside his or her usual country of residence for at least one year.⁴

According to the UN's definition, the United States is one of the biggest receiving countries for migrants. In 2013, 45,790,000 people living in the United States were born in other countries.⁵ About thirty-three million people have at least one foreign-born parent (Census 2010). This means that at least one in five people in the United States today is a first- or second-generation resident. However, in reality the rate would be even higher if we consider people with a nonimmigrant visa, including pleasure and business travelers, international students, temporary workers and families,⁶ and undocumented immigrants.

² Christopher Inkpen, "7 Facts About World Migration," *Pew Research Center*, September 2, 2014, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/09/02/7-facts-about-world-migration/> (accessed March 8, 2017).

³ Khalid Koser, *International Migration: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.

⁴ Koser, 4.

⁵ Inkpen, "7 Facts About World Migration."

⁶ According to the Department of Homeland Security, 76,638,236 nonimmigrants were admitted in 2015. John Teke and Waleed Navaroo, "Nonimmigrant Admissions to the United States: 2015," *Annual Flow Report*, last modified December, 2016, https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/Nonimmigrant_Admissions_2015.pdf (accessed January 18, 2017).

Researchers expect that America will be even more diverse in the future. Pew Research reported, “Americans are more racially and ethnically diverse than in the past, and the U.S. is projected to be even more diverse in the coming decades. *By 2055, the U.S. will not have a single racial or ethnic majority.*”⁷ Growing numbers of migrants and their descendants imply more than just the sharing of geographical territories. These international migrants impact the societies of their sending countries and their receiving countries in many different ways. Stephen Castles and Hein de Haas point out that “the settlement of migrant groups and formation of ethnic minorities can fundamentally change the social, cultural, economic and political fabric of societies, particularly in the longer run, for receiving societies.”⁸ These changes, borne through the lives of migrants, impact congregations and leaders, as well.

*Understanding Contemporary Migrants with a Transnational Approach*⁹

Increasing numbers of migrants—whether they are short-term visitors or long-term residents—result in a variety of changes for the receiving society. Traditionally, migrants were understood as people who came to a new country and quickly adjusted to the receiving country and its culture. However, migration is much more complex than such simple assimilation into the hosting country. Recently, a transnational approach to migration has emerged, providing a more nuanced and helpful understanding of contemporary migration.

⁷ D’vera Cohn and Andrea Caumont, “10 Demographic Trends that Are Shaping the U.S. and the World,” *Pew Research Center*, March 31, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/03/31/10-demographic-trends-that-are-shaping-the-u-s-and-the-world/> (accessed March 18, 2017) (emphasis added).

⁸ Castles and de Haas, 1.

⁹ This section is adapted from Jin’s research. Jinna Sil Lo Jin, *Ignored: A Practical Theology Inquiry of Korean-Speaking Young Adults in a Transnational Congregational Context* (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2017), 83–85.

The term *transnational* appeared in the early 1970s to describe the proliferation of non-state institutions and governance regimes acting across boundaries.¹⁰ In 1992, the term *transnationalism* began to be used for migration studies by the anthropologists Basch, Glick Schiller, and Blanc-Szanton.¹¹ Nina Glick Schiller and her colleagues insisted that contemporary immigrants have significantly differences experiences compared with earlier immigrants. They demonstrated that although immigrants of earlier years broke off social relations and cultural ties to their homeland, and thereby relocated themselves solely within the sociocultural, economic, and political orbit of the receiving society, the networks, activities, and patterns of life of today's immigrants span both their host and home societies. Following the lead of these anthropologists, transnationalism has become the most prevalent contemporary framework for approaching migration studies.¹² It has been integrated with economic, social, political, and even religious fields, in order to understand and analyze migration and cross-cultural activities.

¹⁰ Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Transnational Relations and World Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972).

¹¹ Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton, "Transnationalism: A New Analytic Framework for Understanding Migration," in *Towards a Transnational Perspective on Migration: Race, Class, Ethnicity, and Nationalism Reconsidered*, eds. Nina Glick Schiller, Linda Basch, and Cristina Blanc-Szanton (New York: New York Academy of Sciences, 1992).

¹² For more information on transnationalism, please see these authors: Thomas Faist, Margit Fauser, and Eveline Reisenauer, *Transnational Migration* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2013); Peggy Levitt, *The Transnational Villagers* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2001); Peggy Levitt and B. Nadya Jaworsky, "Transnational Migration Studies: Past Developments and Future Trends," *Annual Review of Sociology* 33 (2007): 129–156; Peggy Levitt and Nina Glick Schiller, "Conceptualizing Simultaneity: A Transnational Social Field Perspective on Society," *International Migration Review* 38(3) (2004): 1002–1039; Alejandro Portes, "Introduction: The Debates and Significance of Immigrant Transnationalism," *Global Networks* 1(3) (2001): 181–193; Steven Vertovec, "Cheap Calls: The Social Glue of Migrant Transnationalism," *Global Networks* 4(2) (April 2004): 219–224.

Although the transnationalism discussion is vast, a narrowed focus of four important themes will help us understand the transnationality of today's migrants. First, researchers have highlighted the crucial role of technological development. Although there is some debate as to whether or not the transnational aspect of migration is a new phenomenon, scholars generally agree that technological development—including the Internet, accessible international calls, and international trips—allows for a much higher level of communication and mobility (connectivity) across national boundaries. Second, the transnational approach contributes to a different level of understanding migration and migrants' lives. Traditionally, migration studies mainly focused on immigrants' assimilation to hosting countries, while ignoring how they continued to engage with their home cultures. However, the transnational approach countervails against unidirectional assimilation thinking by demonstrating how migrants maintain their homeland culture even as they assimilate into the new culture. Third, although some transnational elements are found in the experiences of all migrants, the degree of connectivity between home and host countries—transnationality¹³—can vary depending on an individual's given context in relation to transnational activities and spaces. Fourth, although research is lacking, it is clear that religions have played a crucial role in migrants' lives by providing transnational religious spaces. Studies agree that religious communities help migrants not only adapt and settle into the hosting country but also continue to make an impact on their home country.¹⁴ For example, with her term *transnational religious space*, Olivia Sheringham argues that religion's role is crucial not only for migrants, but also for their friends and families who do not migrate, but who send and receive people and remittances.¹⁵

¹³ Thomas Faist, Margit Fauser, and Eveline Reisenauer, *Transnational Migration* (Malden, Mass.: Polity Press, 2013), 15.

¹⁴ See Ebaugh, Helen Rose, "Transnationality and Religion in Immigrant Congregations," *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 23(2) (2010): 105–119.

¹⁵ Olivia Sheringham, *Transnational Religious Spaces: Faith and the Brazilian Migration Experience* (Basingstoke, U.K.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

Christian Response

Although migration is one of the most important contemporary issues, and many voices are clamoring about how to deal with different cultures and immigrants in politics, economics, and education, it is rare to find distinctly Christian voices on this matter. The growing literature of migrant theology seems to be only for the few people who have personally experienced migration, and this has never been a crucial voice for Christian culture. Gioacchino Campese argues that church studies have been largely silent about human migration:¹⁶

Even the most recent studies in ecclesiology and reflections on the state of the church in Italy and the United States by well-known theologians are basically silent about immigration. They deal with the foundations of Christian ecclesiology and other very important current issues such as the crisis of the relations of the church with civil society and contemporary culture, the challenge of preaching the gospel in a secularized society, the massive exodus from the Roman Catholic church, the issue of authority within the church, and others. Nothing is being said about immigration; about the way this phenomenon is transforming our societies; about the cultural and religious diversity that it causes; its omnipresence in the political debate; and indeed in the lives of people, both native and immigrant.

In the same light, there is a serious lack of study and reflection on church leadership in multicultural settings. Since ecclesiology (which also includes attention to authority and leadership in the church) does not reflect upon migration, it might be accurately expected that few resources on church leadership in multicultural settings can be found. Considering the significance of migration and its multiple impacts on ministry contexts, this lack of studies and resources available for church leadership is a sad reality.

¹⁶ Gioacchino Campese, "But I See That Somebody Is Missing," in *Ecclesiology and Exclusion*, ed. Pascal D. Bazzell (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2012), 79.

The limited extant research and resources about church leadership in multicultural settings are either from a missionary perspective (how Christian leaders can engage with people in foreign lands) or at best urging cultural sensitivity at home.¹⁷ Although these references are still helpful for understanding encounters with other cultures, they do not demonstrate how local church leadership should practically engage with the reality of transnational migration.

Campese offers four possible reasons for the relative silence of current church studies on human migration, despite its crucial significance in contemporary ministry and daily life.¹⁸ First, he states that ecclesiology is often too inward looking, and it does not give enough attention and consideration to the real world to which it has been called to announce the good news. It often sounds like a theory disconnected from daily reality. Second, he points out that ecclesiology is often too *Western-centric*. It is not yet completely ready and willing to listen to voices, experiences, and reflections that come from outside, especially from outside cultures that are often considered as somehow inferior to Western civilizations. Third, Campese lays out the suspicion that ecclesiology sometimes follows the lead of non-exemplary church authorities who prefer to be silent or to speak as little as possible regarding controversial issues, because silence and diplomacy could buy the church political privileges and economic support. Lastly, he points out that ecclesiology often does not take into consideration the fact that God could be speaking to the churches

¹⁷ Cf. Duane Elmer, *Cross-Cultural Connections: Stepping Out and Fitting in Around the World* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2002); Sherwood Lingenfelter, *Leading Cross-Culturally: Covenant Relationships for Effective Christian Leadership* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008); Sherwood Lingenfelter and Marvin Mayers, *Ministering Cross-Culturally: An Incarnational Model for Personal Relationships*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 2008); Jim Plueddemann, *Leading Across Cultures: Effective Ministry and Mission in the Global Church* (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008).

¹⁸ Campese, "But I See That Somebody Is Missing," 80–81.

through the “foreign” and “strange” voices of the immigrants.

As a partial correction to this ecclesiological silence, I will now introduce a case study of Korean-speaking young adults to understand contemporary immigrants and their experiences. Based on that case study, I will conclude this article by offering suggestions for constructive leadership in a changing transnational context.

A Story of Korean-Speaking Young Adults in Korean Immigrant Churches¹⁹

Traditionally, studies on the emerging generation of immigrants have been focused only on English-speaking young people, who are often called the Second Generation. This pattern holds true for Korean immigrant studies, which have focused heavily on the English-speaking Korean American younger generation for research and ministry programs. Although few studies have been conducted on the so-called 1.5 generation, who were born in Korea and came to the United States by age twelve, most

¹⁹ The church has been a crucial and central place for Korean immigrants from the earliest immigrant community until now. More than 4,000 Korean churches are located in America, and Korean immigrants have high affiliation with their churches. For more information about Korean immigrant churches, please see Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, “Religious Participation of Korean Immigrants in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29(1) (1990): 19–34; Pyong Min Gap and Sou Hyun Jang, “The Diversity of Asian Immigrants’ Participation in Religious Institutions in the United States,” *Sociology of Religion* 76(3) (Fall 2015): 261; Pyong Min Gap, *Preserving Ethnicity Through Religion in America: Korean Protestant and Indian Hindus Across Generations* (New York: New York University Press, 2010); Pyong Min Gap and Dae Young Kim, “The Intergenerational Transmission of Religion and Ethnicity Among Korean Protestant Immigrants,” *Sociology of Religion* 66(3) (2005): 263–282; Kwang Chung Kim and Shin Kim, “The Ethnic Role of Korean Immigrant Churches in the United States” in *Korean Americans and Their Religions: Pilgrims and Missionaries*, ed. Ho Young Kwon, Kwang Chung Kim, and Stephen R. Warner (University Park, Penn.: Pennsylvania State University, 2001), 71–94; and Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim, “Religious Participation of Korean Immigrants in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 29(1) (1990): 19–34.

studies, especially those that deal with younger generations of the Korean immigrant church, conflate both as one group.²⁰ These studies assume that all of the younger generation of Korean immigrants are English speakers who assimilate into American culture more than they retain their Korean culture.

However, English-speaking Korean Americans are not the only younger generation in the Korean immigrant church. Another group of young people has been ignored and forgotten in scholarly research and ministry practice—Korean-speaking young people. Most Korean immigrant churches have a “Korean-speaking young adult ministry” department, and these young adults play important roles in their church.

Who Are Korean-Speaking Young Adults?

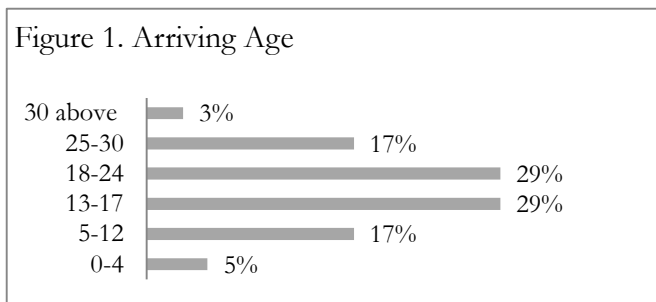
In order to learn about this hidden group of young people, I conducted 404 surveys and forty in-depth interviews (twenty-seven Korean-speaking young adults and thirteen pastors who are serving Korean-speaking young adult ministry) as part of my dissertation.²¹ Korean-speaking young adults are people who choose to attend a Korean-speaking ministry. This does not necessarily mean that they speak only Korean or that they assimilate less than English-speaking young people.

It was surprising that Korean-speaking young adult departments have a significant number of individuals who arrived in America at an early age. As shown in Figure 1, five percent (twenty-two) of those interviewed were either born in the United States or arrived before the age of four, while seventeen percent (sixty-nine) arrived between the ages of five and twelve. Traditionally, people who were born here are considered to be “second generation” and

²⁰ Pyong Min Gap and Sou Hyun Jang, 253–274.

²¹ For details about methods and results of this research, please see Jinna Sil Lo Jin, *Ignored: A Practical Theology Inquiry of Korean-Speaking Young Adults in a Transnational Congregational Context* (Ph.D. diss., Fuller Theological Seminary, 2017), 15–41.

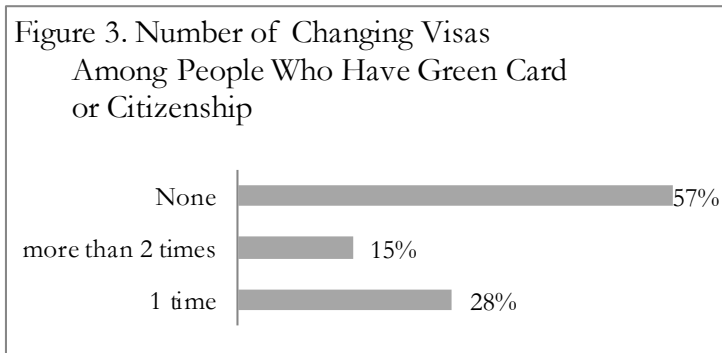
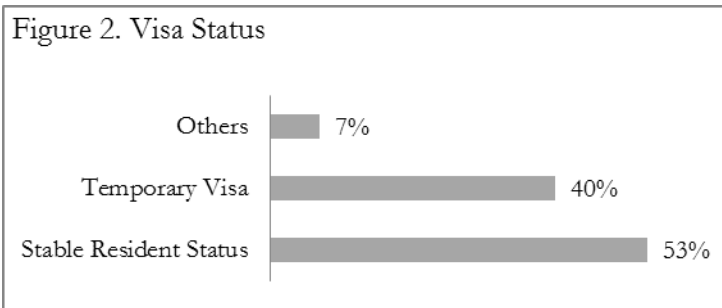
people who came to America during their early teens (usually before age twelve) were considered to be the “1.5 generation,”²² assuming that they were more assimilated into American culture (especially with using English as their primary language) than the immigrant generation who came to America at a later age. In traditional studies, people who are born or came in their early childhood have mainly been considered English-speaking people who would be involved in English ministry in their immigrant churches. However, this survey shows that nearly one quarter of the members of the Korean-speaking departments arrived before the age of twelve, and that thus there might be a different way to categorize these young people than the traditional way of categorizing them as belonging to either the 1.5 or second generation.



In this survey, a significant portion of people either currently hold or at one point have held a temporary visa. See Figure 2 for a bar graph of the breakdown. In the survey, fifty-three percent (213) of those interviewed had stable resident status and forty percent (158) had a temporary visa, such as a student, work, or travel visa.

²² The term *Korean 1.5 generation* has generally been used for people who were born in Korea and came to America before the age of twelve. Danico defined the Korean 1.5 generation as those “who are bicultural and bilingual and who immigrated to the United States during their formative years. They are socialized in both Korean and American cultures and concialized in both Korean and American cultures and consequently express both sets of cultural values and beliefs.” Mary Yu Danico, *The 1.5 Generation*, 2.

Seven percent (twenty-eight) reported being undocumented.²³ Among the fifty-three percent who have stable resident status, forty-three percent (ninety-four) reported undergoing status changes (one time: twenty-eight percent and more than 2 times: fifteen percent; See Figure 3) before acquiring permanent residency or naturalized citizenship in the United States. In other words, the survey indicates that seventy percent (281) of the people in Korean-speaking young adult departments have likely experienced some kind of uncertain legal status between two different countries while holding temporary visas.



In different ways, this research highlights Korean-speaking young adults’ transnationality—their connection with both Korean and American cultures. A significant

²³ Recognizing the Korean shame-based culture, the survey provided an option for “Others” instead of “Undocumented.”

number of Korean-speaking young adults reported that they have close family members in Korea (seventy-nine percent) and the States (sixty-six percent). While they are staying in the States, Korean-speaking young adults still retain strong ties in Korea. Among the twenty-seven in-depth interviewees, eighty-two percent (twenty-two) said they contacted people in Korea regularly (at least once a week) via international calls, e-mails, text, and the Internet. Ninety-six percent (twenty-six) explicitly reported that they or their family members had sent or received remittances to or from Korea. Furthermore, all of them (one hundred percent) reported that they regularly use Korean social network services and media.

Although these Korean-speaking young adults have kept strong ties to Korea, this does not mean that their assimilation to America is less pronounced. The results of the survey and interviews show that they have been exposed to American culture as well. Out of 404 surveys, sixty-six percent (267) of Korean-speaking young adults reported that they have close family in America. Out of thirty-seven in-depth interviews with Korean-speaking young adults, all of them reported being bilingual, although their level of proficiency in each language varied. In addition, all of them were exposed to American culture via education or work settings. Interviewees had all received primary and secondary education, and many had also gone to college. Those from the in-depth interviews who arrived at older ages were still engaged in graduate schools or private education (either to seek further degrees or to keep their student status in order to maintain their visa status). Some of them also work in English-speaking environments. Although some work in Korean-speaking settings, they still have another place where they are exposed to American culture, such as school or a part-time job.

Their Experiences

Loneliness: While dealing with two cultures, Korean-speaking young adults seem to have a difficult time finding a community where they can belong. One of the most

salient features of their experience was loneliness. Every single Korean-speaking young adult interviewee indicated his or her loneliness in one way or another. Surprisingly, one hundred percent (twenty-seven) of the respondents in the in-depth interviews commented that the reason Korean-speaking young people come to church, in addition to reasons of faith, is because they are lonely. A couple of people directly articulated, “Every Korean-speaking young adult is lonely.” However, the loneliness that Korean-speaking young adults experience is not the same as that experienced by American young adults. Their loneliness is unique and arguably deeper as a result of their ethnic minority status in America. Even though Korean-speaking young adults can speak English (indeed, some of them are perfectly fluent in English), they still experience rejection, feel marginalized, and have a hard time building authentic relationships in American settings like school and work.

In light of these struggles and the resulting loneliness, it seems that Korean-speaking young adults are seeking communities where they fit in. Often, their church communities seem to be the only places where they can belong. Korean-speaking young adult departments offer a unique social sphere where Korean-speaking young adults can forge meaningful relationships. Most of them, including those who are fluent in English, stated that most of their friends are church friends, and that they do not have any friends outside of their Korean-speaking young adult groups. It seems that Korean-speaking young adult groups are the only community in which these young adults can be understood and where they can find welcoming people who share in common their transitional life stage, marginalization as Koreans, and transnational identity.

Disconnectedness: Throughout the surveys and interviews, it was evident that Korean-speaking young adults not only experience disconnection from American society, but also from the Korean immigrant community. It was obvious that all of the Korean-speaking young adult interviewees consider themselves as minority and marginalized individuals in American society. Whether or

not they explicitly articulated it in the interviews, it was clear that they held a common assumption that the struggles they are facing with ignorance and indifference from American society are parts of their minority life in the States. In this condition, Korean-speaking young adults pursue people to connect with, who will not reject and ignore them. This is why the church community is so crucial to them.

However, they experience disconnection in their own ethnic church, as well. The research indicates that although they hold tight to their own group (the Korean-speaking young adult department), their group is disconnected from the rest of the congregation. A significant majority of the pastors interviewed (eighty-five percent, or eleven) reported that their Korean-speaking young adult departments did not have relationships with the other departments. Even more of the young adult interviewees (ninety-three percent, or twenty-five) reported that they did not have significant relationships with the adults in the church. Among these, more than half (fifty-six percent, or fifteen) stated that they do not know any adults in the church at all. Although some church-wide events are held, such as special services or church-wide picnics, these are insufficient for building relationships. One of the lay leaders described this segregation as a sad reality: "We are so disconnected, it's as if we go to different churches. Sometimes I feel we have a different faith than the adult congregation." Similarly, one of the pastor interviewees reported that "although most of the Korean immigrant church is structurally fragmented, the disconnection of Korean-speaking young adults from the adult congregation is especially deep. Adults in the church just do not know who these young people are."

A Feeling of Being Ignored: The research indicates that Korean-speaking young adults are not only disconnected from American society and Korean immigrant churches, but also ignored. As an ethnic minority group, Korean-speaking young adults are often marginalized. As I already pointed out, in society and even in Christian environments, the voices of immigrants are ignored and

deemed inferior to Western citizens; Korean immigrants are no exception in this regard.

What stood out throughout the research is that Korean-speaking young adult groups are still marginalized in their own ethnic community. Because of their age and their temporary visa, they often are treated as inferior people or even outsiders. One of pastor interviewees said:

Adults in the church tend to treat Korean-speaking young adults as “temporary members” because these young people do not stay longer than adults due to their visa status, job, and school. However, this high mobility is not just a Korean-speaking young adult group’s issue. It is just because of their life stage. Also, there are a lot of adults who do not stay long enough. Treating these young people as not members is not fair.

In the same light, more than half (fifty-four percent, or seven) of pastors mentioned that because their senior pastors or elders do not understand or have any interest in Korean-speaking young adults, this group of young people did not have proper support for their ministry.

As the marginalized in their own ethnic church, Korean-speaking young adults reported that they do not have a voice. None of the forty interviewees (either pastors or young adults) said they were involved in the decision-making processes of the church. They are not invited to make any decisions, not only for church-wide or adult departments, but even for their own Korean-speaking young adult department. Throughout the interviews, the research indicates that Korean-speaking young adult groups often feel that they are treated as less important and ignored.

Leadership in a Changing Transnational Context

The reality we are facing with migration and transnational context requires us to reconsider our leadership. In this section, I would like to provide five components of leadership in transnational context. These include: (1) leadership that understands *Missio Dei*, (2)

leadership that listens to context, (3) leadership that respects human dignity and agency, (4) leadership that creates an environment where God's primary agency and people's partnering agency are fruitfully aligned, and (5) leadership that guides a community to continue a cycle of action-reflection. Although these are all important pieces for any Christian leadership in general, they are even more crucial in this changing transnational context. Thus, this section will explore each piece with its implications for a transnational context.

Leadership That Understands the Missio Dei

The most crucial essence of Christian leadership is to understand who God is and who his people are. This remains constant whether the context is Asian, Western, or African. The church is not a just any gathering of people; it is an assembly of God's people who are called according to his purpose (Rom. 8:28) in his name (John 14:13).²⁴ Thus, the Christian community is to seek to participate in God's work. In other words, it is not the leaders' or the church's work to come up with plans and actions; rather it is God's work, which God has initiated and continues to sustain. God has sent his Son, his Spirit, and his people to be part of God's mission—the *Missio Dei*.²⁵

Missio Dei brings some important implications for Christian leaders, particularly about power and authority. *Missio Dei* holds that God is the one who initiates, continues, and completes his redemptive work, and the church is called to be part of that work. Thus, absolute power and authority belong to God, not to human leaders. Given this foundation, the leader's role is not exercising personal power and authority for the sake of initiating or making decisions or telling people what to do, but to make

²⁴ Chap Clark, "Introduction," in *Adoptive Youth Ministry*, ed. Chap Clark (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic), 1.

²⁵ For *Missio Dei*, see David Jacobus Bosch, *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1991) and Craig Van Gelder, *Missional Church in Context* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2007), 237.

God's power and work more explicit so that God's community can understand their calling. Authoritarian or top-down leadership cannot make God's power visible. Rather, it forces people of the community to serve and follow a human leader's power and will.

Although this foundation of *Missio Dei* is important to every Christian community, it is even more crucial in a community with different ethnic groups and cultures. In cross-cultural settings, there is often an invisible (or even a visible) social hierarchy based on ethnicity, culture, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, historical narratives of mission as giving to people in need based on misunderstanding of a Western, colonial, and unilateral perspective still exist.²⁶ In this context, God's mission is practiced wrongly, and people from different cultures are expected to possibly follow leaders or people from the majority, assuming that power and authority belong to them.

Furthermore, in a changing transnational context, where different cultures encounter one another with increasing frequency and intensity, people experience many changes and challenges. Often, leaders try to control people with their power, either by attempting to maintain their tradition or by creating new practices.²⁷ However, the first, most crucial work of leadership is not to control but to discern God, the primary agent of his own ongoing mission. Otherwise, anxiety, fear, and the inconveniences that result from encountering different cultures can easily tempt leaders and community to seek power to control, instead of participating in God's reign and mission.

²⁶ Gioacchino Campese, "Theologies of Migration: Present and Future Perspectives," in *Migration als Ort der Theologie*, ed. Tobias Keffler (Regensburg, Germany: Verlag Friedrich Pustet, 2014), 180.

²⁷ Alan Roxburgh, *The Sky Is Falling: Leaders Lost in Transition* (Eagle, Idaho: Allelon Publishing, 2006), 86–87.

Leadership That Listens to Context

In a changing transnational context, Christian leadership requires listening carefully to context. If we believe that God is the initiator and main agent of his ongoing redemptive mission, we must admit that God is already working even in our own context. God does not operate in an abstract world. Rather, God is present where we are living. Mark Lau Branson concurs: “Observing God’s current, local initiatives is a key matter for organizational imagination and leadership.”²⁸ Thus, the given context, including people and place, is where leaders and communities need to pay serious attention in order to learn what is going on and what God is up to. Unless we learn and discern what God is doing concretely in a specific context, it is almost impossible to discern what part God is calling us to play and how we may participate in his work. Taking the context seriously by listening and observing attentively for God’s ongoing activity implies our humble action of putting God’s agenda first.

Listening to and understanding context means taking seriously both the micro and macro levels of context. It requires attentively listening, observing, and understanding people and places in connection with their culture, narratives, and experiences. It also pays serious attention to what is going on at wider levels (e.g., national and international) with issues and narratives related to the community. Often, the social sciences, including cultural studies, offer great help for understanding context. Chap Clark argues that whatever the source of these data sets, anything that speaks to the human condition such that believers can receive a deeper and more thorough understanding of the context in which the Gospel is to be

²⁸ Mark Lau Branson and Juan Francisco Martinez, “A Practical Theology of Leadership with International Voices,” *Journal of Religious Leadership* 10(2) (2011): 46.

lived out is an important part of understanding that context and God.²⁹

Although understanding context is important in any setting, it is especially crucial in our contemporary church context with growing numbers of people from different cultures. Often, theology is disconnected from this reality, which introduces a barrier to God's work instead of offering support to it. As Campese points out, the lack of attention of current church studies to the context results in silence and ignorance of human migration; this disconnectedness from daily life marginalizes many precious and crucial people of God.³⁰ However, mainstream North American Christianity is not alone in its disconnectedness from context. As we see with the case of Korean-speaking young adults, even among minority communities, people are easily forgotten when the community does not recognize and accept its changing context as a place where God works.

Leadership That Respects Human Dignity and Agency

Leadership in a changing transnational context should respect human dignity and agency. While affirming God's primary agency, we need to understand God's intention to call all of his people (not just leaders) to be agents of his mission. In this claim, two important implications should be recognized. One is human dignity based on the *Imago Dei*. Beyond state and nation, beyond ethnicity and culture, and beyond gender and age, human beings are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26–27, 5:1–3, 9:6, 1 Cor. 11:7, Jas. 3:9). This is God's intention and a nonnegotiable truth for human identity and theological anthropology. The other one is human agency. Because human beings are created in God's image and likeness, they

²⁹ Chap Clark, "Youth Ministry as Practical Theology," *Journal of Youth Ministry* 7(1) (2008): 17.

³⁰ Campese, "But I See That Somebody Is Missing," 79.

have capacity as subjects and agents who are able to reflect, discern, and respond.³¹

In this light, people are important beings who have been created in God's image and have the capacity to do God's work. God has not called only leaders and pastors to be partners in his work. God has called ordinary people as well. He works and speaks through his people. Thus, participating in God's ongoing redemptive work requires respecting that human beings are valuable in and of themselves, with an inherent capacity to do God's work. In other words, a leader's role in the Christian community is to treat that community's people as subjects of mission, not objects.

This is even more crucial in contexts of transcultural interactions because people from different cultures face discrimination and dehumanization in many different ways. Scholars point out that language—which includes common terms like *refugee*, *migrant*, *forced migrant*, *immigrants*, *undocumented*, *illegal*, *internally displaced person*, and *alien*—places on individuals such limited labels, and those labels carry political, legal, and social consequences, but they do not convey human dignity.³² Also, people from different cultures can doubt their capacity and ability due to language barriers, cultural clumsiness, or a lack of financial resources. Furthermore, in light of discrimination and dehumanization, immigrants are easily treated as objects of mission in Christian contexts as well. Historically, churches have provided help and resources to immigrants who are minoritized and marginalized people in need. In this context, immigrants easily become objects, such that it becomes difficult even to imagine that God can speak through them. Thus, in a changing transnational migratory context, leadership should intentionally and consistently

³¹ Thomas H. Groome, *Sharing Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 8.

³² Daniel G. Groody, "Crossing the Divine: Foundations of a Theology of Migration and Refugees," *Theological Studies* 70 (2009): 642–643; Roger Zetter, "Labeling Refugees: The Forming and Transforming of a Bureaucratic Identity," *Journal of Refugee Studies* (4) (1991): 39–62, at 40.

give reminders of human dignity and subjectivity, contrary to our wrong assumption that God would not be speaking to the churches through the “foreign” and “strange” voices of the immigrants.³³

Leadership That Creates an Environment to Link God's Primary Agency and People's Partnering Agency

As many scholars have pointed out, a leader is not a person who tells people what to do. Rather, the role of the leader is to create an environment. Roxburgh and Romanuk state that the work of leadership is the cultivation of an environment that releases the missional imagination of God's ordinary people.³⁴ In the same light, van Gelder and Zscheile argue that leaders should create the conditions under which people can come together in shared life to discover their participation in God's mission.³⁵ Mark Lau Branson and Juan Martinez write that leadership is about shaping learning environments and connecting them with diverse resources so that a social group can engage in change.³⁶

Creating this kind of environment is crucial work in a changing transnational context for at least three reasons. First, we simply do not know what to do with this changing context. On the one hand, this is a new context that we have never experienced before. We are encountering many different cultures, and people are now not only assimilating into their hosting culture but consistently keeping their ties to their home cultures. These are adaptive changes, not technical problems. There are no simple answers. It takes a community and an environment to identify the challenges

³³ Campese, “But I See That Somebody Is Missing,” 81.

³⁴ Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping Your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 29.

³⁵ Craig Van Gelder and Dwight Zscheile, *The Missional Church in Perspective: Mapping Trends and Shaping the Conversation*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2011), 156.

³⁶ Branson and Martinez, “A Practical Theology of Leadership with International Voices,” 27.

and discern solutions.³⁷ On the other hand, in this adaptive change, the unchanging truth is that God is the initiator and primary agent. Thus, in order to learn how to respond to a changing transnational context for participating in God's kingdom, the community needs an environment where its members can discern God and his call together through listening to the Holy Spirit and to one another. By paying attention to God and other people in the community of believers, God can speak through each one of us, and the church can faithfully participate in and contribute to God's kingdom.

Second, people need a safe environment that makes possible experiments in communal responses. In seeking God's will about adaptive challenges, a next faithful step can come about only through experiments. Mark Lau Branson writes, "Experiments help people check their reading of the circumstances and their discernment of the Spirit as they seek to enter into what God is doing on the ground."³⁸ When encountering different cultures, expectations, and stories, trying out something new without knowing the answer is risky work. It takes courage, support, and faith to try out new ideas and practices, with a willingness to fail. It takes an environment and a community that provides enough safety to try new things, even with the ever-present possibility of failure.

Third, people need community to help them face fleeting emotions as they discern God's will and take the risks of experimenting with new things. The process of discerning God, listening to each other, and embarking on new experiments brings different emotions. There should be joy and celebration when communities sense their contributions to God's kingdom. However, a community

³⁷ For adaptive challenges and technical problems, please see Ronald Heifetz's works: *Leadership on the Line* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2002) and *Leadership Without Easy Answers* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1994).

³⁸ Mark Lau Branson, "Perspectives from the Missional Conversation," *Starting Missional Churches: Life with God in the Neighborhood*, ed. Mark Lau Branson and Nicholas Warnes (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 35.

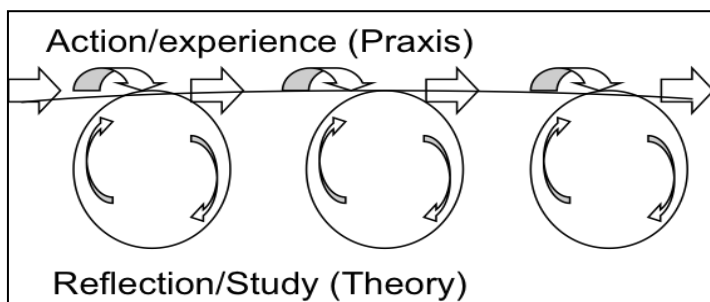
will also face negative emotions when they experience confusion and failure. One of those emotions is fear. Although people frame their issues in different ways, the key problem is often fear.³⁹ Fear surely hinders people from listening, discerning, and experimenting. In addition to fear, Scott Cormode suggests that people in the process of adaptive change experience a grief process as they consider parts of the process as a loss.⁴⁰ In other words, faced with different cultures and expectations and processing changes while attempting to discern God's presence brings unexpected and often difficult feelings. Therefore, constructing an environment where people feel safe enough to express and process these feelings is one of the crucial roles of leadership in a transnational context.

Leadership That Guides Communities to Continue a Cycle of Action and Reflection

Creating an environment to discern God's work and experiment with new practices is not the end of a leader's role. Within such an environment, a leader should guide the community to be involved in a continuous learning cycle of action and reflection—a cycle that builds on itself and by which people grow in capacity and agency. Mark Lau Branson illustrates this cycle:

³⁹ Scott Cormode, *Making Spiritual Sense: Christian Leaders as Spiritual Interpreters* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), xi.

⁴⁰ Cormode, "Constructing a Holding Environment," *The Next Faithful Step*, March 31, 2016, http://leadership.fuller.edu/Leadership/Resources/Part_4Leading_for_Transformative_Change/III_Constructing_a_Holding_Environment.aspx (accessed March 18, 2017).



Epistemology is not fundamentally a matter of amassing data—information—but requires a continuous cycling of action and reflection.... As individuals and as groups, we engage our environment (praxis); then we step back and reflect on ourselves, our environment, and on available theories and information; then we reengage, based on a new understanding of ourselves and our context. This is learning—this is knowledge—the action-reflection cycle that defines praxis-theory-praxis.⁴¹

Continuous engagement with the action-reflection cycle is important because it brings about real learning with real practical benefit. Traditional assumptions about learning—that it is primarily a matter of receiving and gathering information—do not necessarily bring about true learning and changed behavior. As Roxburgh states, merely having a good idea—even a brilliant one—does not mean that it will be accepted or change the way people think, work, or act, because our habits are so strong.⁴² Changes require the continuous work of action-reflection.

⁴¹ Branson and Martinez, “A Practical Theology of Leadership with International Voices,” 32.

⁴² Alan Roxburgh and M. Scott Boren, *Introducing the Missional Church: What It Is, Why It Matters, How to Become One* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2009), 138.

This action-reflection cycle of learning is even more crucial in transnational communities. With technological development and accessible transportation, immigrants have stronger ties with their home countries, even as they remain in their hosting countries. In other words, immigrants are not only carrying their culture and practices, but their cultures are reinforced and reshaped by instant and consistent contact with their home culture through the Internet, phone, mass media, and visits. This means that immigrants are potentially in a state of flux between two nations. Although everyone lives in a changing world, immigrants who are living in two worlds experience even more changes. To work through these continuous and constant changes resulting from negotiating and interacting with two cultures, people from different cultures and groups in a transnational context need a community and leadership that will guide them into an action-reflection cycle, in order to understand what God is doing as they encounter, learn, negotiate, and are challenged by different cultures.

Conclusion: Whose Power Empowers People?

Among different attempts to deal with these intercultural relations, Christian churches have generally been passive or even silent. Although some research has dealt with this matter, such examples are usually about providing resources and support to immigrants who are in need, or at best empowering them. However, even in this Christian perspective, the bottom line of leadership in a cross-cultural setting is about power. Western Christianity has postured and pretended as if it has power. This is a simultaneously scary and sad assumption that Western Christianity has consciously and unconsciously adopted. This assumption leads Western Christianity to think and practice their power to help, support, and empower migrants, as if the latter were only objects of mission and ministry.

However, we must pause and rethink our assumption and behavior. Although there is nothing wrong with

helping people in need, what are the unspoken implications of the practices that Western churches are perpetuating toward immigrants? Whose power helps and empowers people? Are we expecting them to become like “us” because “our” culture is the norm? Are we just giving whatever they need from a distance? Or are we willing to be in close community with them, believing they are one of us? Do we believe that God is the primary agent of mission, and that it is his power that empowers peoples, both immigrants and natives? Are we willing to listen to and accept immigrants as God’s agents and subjects, who can speak God’s word and work God’s will?

If we hold onto God as the primary agent, and migrants and the marginalized as God’s partnering agents, we can see more clearly that it is God’s power that empowers people, and that we need mutuality within our community. In this light, a leader’s role is crucial in this changing transnational context. In order to lead a community that participates in God’s work in contexts with different cultures with mutuality, leaders must understand the *Missio Dei*, listen to the context, respect human dignity and agency, create an environment where God’s primary agency and people’s partnering agency are fruitfully aligned, and guide their community to continue a cycle of action and reflection.

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