

## From Coerced Liminality to In-Beyond the Margin: A Theological Reflection on the History of Asian-American Disciples<sup>1</sup>

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In theologizing about Asian-American experiences, scholars have often used the trope of marginality. Thus *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* is the title of a widely-used book by late Jung Young Lee, a Korean-American theologian known for promoting this concept. *Journeys at the Margin: Toward an Autobiographical Theology in American-Asian Perspective* is another volume in which this trope serves as a framework, a volume edited by Jung Yung Lee. In a more recent work, *Realizing the America of Our Hearts: Theological Voices of Asian Americans*, Sang Hyun Lee, another Korean-American theologian of note, has contributed a chapter titled “Marginality as Coerced Liminality: Toward an Understanding of the Context of Asian American Theology.”<sup>2</sup>

Both Lees, in their distinctive manners, argue that Asians in the United States have been marginalized by the dominant center because of their race, even though they yearned to be full participants in American life. They also posit that since Jesus himself was a marginalized figure in his own time, the margin constitutes a suitable site for theologizing. With varying emphasis, both Lees offer observations on the relation between margin and center – on a marginalized person's position vis-a-vis the center. Jung Young Lee asserts that an ideal position is not in-between margin and center (it can cause one to become culturally schizophrenic) or both-and (such a position may not be acknowledged by the dominant) but in-beyond, where “The condition of in-between and in-both. . . [are] harmonized for one to become *a new marginal person*

1 "Asian-American Disciples" is used here as shorthand for North American Pacific-Asian Disciples.

2 Jung Young Lee (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995). Lee coedited the second volume with Peter Phan, a prolific Vietnamese-American theologian (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1999); and Sang Hyun Lee, edited by Fumitaka Matsuoka and Eleazar S. Fernandez (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003).

*who overcomes marginality without ceasing to be a marginal person.* <sup>3</sup> Sang Hyun Lee also sees a redemptive – transformative – potential of a marginalized position, but he is more concerned to analyze its context, which he characterizes as a coerced liminality. In contemplating the one-hundred-plus-year history of Asian-American Disciples, these two perspectives offer a good frame of reference. For coerced marginality characterizes Asian-Americans' relationship with Disciples' center before 1965 and is relevant even afterward; on the other hand, post-1965 years evidence new developments wherein the Asians and the larger church strive together to achieve a more fully integrated – in-beyond – relationship for both. <sup>4</sup>

### **Asian Disciples before 1965: Coerced Liminality**

In elaborating his view of marginality, Sang Hyun Lee states, "The in-between-ness of the Asian Americans' marginality is neither a temporary nor an entirely voluntary situation. Asian Americans are forced to remain in between, pushed to stay there . . . the Asian American in-between-ness is a forced in-between-ness."<sup>5</sup> Such characterization would befit the lives of all Asian-Americans – the Disciples included – before 1965, be they foreign- or U.S.-born. Ronald Takaki amply documents this truth in his landmark volume, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Among the many stories he tells in it is one about a U.S-born Japanese who sought to purchase a house in Los Angeles, only to be told 114 times out of 119: "You cannot live here. Your money is not good enough. The deed has a racially restrictive covenant, and only members of the Caucasian race may reside here."<sup>6</sup> There were other racist regulations – from the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, to the National Origin Act of 1924 (which prohibited outright South and East Asians from immigrating to the United States), and to the Executive Order 9066 (which authorized the internment of 120,000 or so Japanese immigrants and their children). Maureen Osuga, a U.S.-born Disciple who suffered internment with her family at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, recalls her experience:

<sup>3</sup> Italics original, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> In 1965, the United States finally adopted a racially-neutral immigration policy. It is worth noting that for Asian-American Disciples, 1965, rather than 1968 (the year of restructure) was the watershed year of the decade.

<sup>5</sup> Sang Hyun Lee, "Marginality as Coerced Liminality," 13.

<sup>6</sup> (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1998), 218.

“When World War II broke out, our family was allowed to take only what we could carry to the concentration camp. Vultures swooped down on my father's two drug stores, jewelry store and five and ten cent store, swindling him out of his life's work.”<sup>7</sup>

When it comes to racism against Asians, Christians of the center could hardly claim to be innocent.<sup>8</sup> On the other hand, it cannot be denied that churches were also among few institutions that expressed genuine concern for Asian Americans. Such concern led to the founding of Asian-American Disciples communities in this period – all eight of them. In 1891, for example, First Christian Church of Portland, Oregon, collaborated with Christian Woman's Board of Missions and Chinese denizens of the area to found Portland Chinese Christian Mission. This was the first Asian Disciples community to be founded in America, led for a while by Drake-trained Chinese pastors Jeu Hawk and Louie Hugh, before they returned to China, most likely repelled by the racist environment of the West coast. In 1907, CWBM worked with other Disciples to found Chinese Christian Mission in San Francisco. In 1908 similar work was done with Japanese immigrants in Los Angeles, leading to the founding of the first Japanese Disciples churches – Japanese Christian Church – which became the precursor of All Peoples Church (later Center) and West Adams Christian Church. Three other Japanese Disciples communities were established in California – in San Bernardino, Imperial Valley, and Berkeley – and one more in Rocky Ford, Colorado.<sup>9</sup> In 1933, collaboration between European Americans and Filipino immigrants resulted in the founding of the first Filipino Disciples congregation, also in Los Angeles. These churches served as centers of their respective marginalized communities – orienting their members to the divine, caring for the weak and elderly, educating the young, and providing solace and meaning for them.

7 “Justice,” in Kagiwada memorial Sunday and NAP AD Ministry Week Materials for September 12-18, 1999; Homeland Ministries, Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), page 5.

8 In a UCMS-produced pamphlet for Sunday School, Ben Watson, director of Japanese work in the Pacific Area, wrote, “there are real problems for them [Japanese Americans] and that Christian people are more or less responsible for the problems. We say that prejudice is responsible and that it is due largely to ignorance.” Watson's article is titled “New Americans – Our Opportunity.” The pamphlet, whose title is unavailable to me, is archived at Disciples of Christ Historical Society.

9 Ben E. Watson, *A Story of the Japanese Christian Churches in the United States as Adventures, Discoveries, Achievements, Aspirations*, published "Under the Home Department of the United Christian Missionary Society" (n.p., n.d.).

Despite the solicitude that led to the founding of these churches, it could not be denied that Asian-American Disciples found themselves in a marginalized existence, coerced to be dependent on the dominant church. The flow of power was clear – missionary work was done to Asians by well-meaning white Disciples, often represented by United Christian Missionary Society. Decisions were made for them by UCMS. This fact became painfully clear when the dominant church experienced financial distress or societal forces seemed to disfavor the marginalized. Given this reality, perhaps it is not surprising that seven of eight Asian Disciples churches suffered closure before 1965, though one of them managed to reconstitute itself.<sup>10</sup> The closure of Portland Chinese Mission was the subject of the following announcement which appeared in the February 1924 issue of *World Call*, the leading Disciples magazine of the time; the announcement was made by a local advisory board entrusted with supervising the Chinese mission:

On account of peculiar conditions among the Chinese, such as the decreasing Chinese population, the inability to secure trained native leadership. . . and the consequent small attendance at religious services we do not feel it wise to spend so much missionary money for the results obtained. . . . In view of the existing conditions among the Chinese of Portland, Oregon, and the policy and program under which we seem compelled to carry on the work of our mission among them, we recommend to the home department of the United Christian Missionary society as follows: . . . That the Chinese Mission at Portland, Oregon, be discontinued, effective February 1, 1924.

The most important of the “peculiar conditions” left unsaid in this notice was stated forthrightly in a UCMS pamphlet: “Chinese exclusion laws and bitter race prejudice caused the depletion of the Chinese community. Therefore, in 1923 [ibid], it seemed best to close the mission.”<sup>11</sup> In time, San Francisco’s Chinese Institute also closed, and when the Executive Order 9066 was issued, what was left of the five original Japanese communities, too, disbanded.<sup>12</sup> Only the Filipino church escaped closure and thrives to this day.

### **Asian Disciples after 1965: Striving toward In-Beyond**

Had such “coerced liminality” persisted unabated beyond 1965, it is doubtful many Asians would have remained to identify themselves as Disciples at the end of the

10 In 1948 the disbanded Japanese Christian Church was reconstituted as West Adams Christian Church (DOC). Joe Nagano, one of the original members, "And only after considerable pleading was our church allowed to begin as the West Adams Christian church." Mr. Joe Nagano's letter to Dr. Geunhee Yu (n.d., North American Pacific Asian Disciples Ministries, Division of Homeland Ministries, Christian Church [Disciples of Christ]).

11 “Where We Have Shared,” March 26, 1953.

12 For informative anecdotes on All Peoples Church – what became of Japanese Christian Church after 1942 – see Dan B. Geunung, *A Street Called Love: The Story of All Peoples Christian church and Center, Los Angeles, California* (Pasadena, CA: Hope Publishing House, 2000).

twentieth century. Yet by 2006 – the year the fourteenth biennial Assembly of the North American Pacific Asian Disciples was held in Berkeley, California – eighty-three Asian-American churches and communities were identified as Disciples. And these churches represented eleven different ethnic groups: Burmese, Cambodian, Chin, Chinese, Filipinos, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Mongolian, Samoan, and Vietnamese. How did this come about? What is NAPAD? What went right?

To answer these questions adequately is beyond the scope of this essay, but even a brief answer would have to concede that during the past fifty years something had happened in American society and church (Disciples included of course) such that – *pace* Sang Hyun Lee – the marginality of Asian-American Disciples had become less coercive. Societally, the obvious turning point was the enactment of the Immigration Act of 1965, which allowed Asians to immigrate on the same basis as Europeans, enabling the long overdue influx of immigrants from all comers of Asia. Just as important was the civil rights movement of the era, which impelled members of the dominant society/church to rethink how they related to the marginalized in their midst.

One has to attribute it to grace that Disciples have had their share of leaders thus impelled. And if only one of them could be mentioned as having had a significant impact on the Asian-American Disciples community, the person would have to be Harold Johnson. Johnson served as director of evangelism in the Division of Home Missions in the 1970s and retired in 1990. An Asian-American Disciples newsletter issued in April 1990 dedicated a section to him:

Harold Johnson is advocate of. . . listening intensely before regarding and accepting deserved criticisms, notably by minorities of the ‘majority.’ He has been instrumental in getting policies changed. . . at DHM . . . that put into practice the goals of the minority leadership in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). In this specific connection, AAD has been greatly privileged to have Harold Johnson serve as one of them, as well as in roles of able advocate and faithful guide these many years.<sup>13</sup>

Johnson is beloved by Asian Disciples because as a person of the center – as Jung Young Lee would say – he has had a knack of identifying with the marginalized, especially the Asians.

Of course, not even Johnson could have revitalized the moribund Asian-American Disciples ministry alone. The rest of the powers that be in the restructured Disciples communion had to be willing to listen to him when challenged to commit resources to the Asian ministry. More important, there had to be Asian-American Disciples who

13 *AAD News*, April 1990. Also see Janet Casey-Allen's article "Disciples of Asian Origin Vie for Their Place," in *The Disciple* (May 1994): 8-12.

would be willing to work with Johnson, matching him in faith and just plain doggedness. In both respects, Disciples have been fortunate. For Johnson not only found support from sympathetic General Ministers of the denomination (beginning with Kenneth Teegarden) but also partners in a number of Asian-American leaders – each of whom matched him in passion and ability, ounce for ounce. These leaders included Grace Kim and Janet Casey-Allen, Maureen Osuga and JoAnne Kagiwada, John Lau and Jaikwan Ahn, Luz Bacerra and Itoko Maeda, Manuel Tamayo and Royal Morales, and David Kagiwada and Soongook Choi. David Kagiwada and Choi had been especially important partners of Johnson in integrating the marginality of the Asian community with the Euro-American center of the denomination. Kagiwada was a second-generation Japanese American, had suffered internment during the Second World War, and was passionate advocate of justice. Choi was an articulate leader of the Stone-Campbell Movement in Korea and Korean-America and was a dauntless spokesman of Asian Disciples causes.

Thanks in large part to the dedication of the Johnson-Kagiwada-Choi trio, the Asians succeeded in integrating with – not assimilating into – the rest of the church. In 1979, a General Assembly formally recognized them as American Asian Disciples, a bona-fide group of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).<sup>14</sup> In the following year, AAD held its first convocation, holding it biennially thereafter. Upon David Kagiwada's untimely death in 1985, a scholarship was established in his name to support Asian-American Disciples seminarians (later a similar scholarship was established in Choi's name). In September 1993, Kagiwada Sunday and AAD (later NAPAD) Ministry Week were officially declared to be annual observances in the church calendar. A year before, the position of Executive Pastor for North American Asian Ministries had been established, housed in the Division of Homeland Ministries, with the aim of providing leadership for the care and growth of Asian-American Disciples churches. And during the first decade of its first (and current) occupant, Geunhee Yu, the number of the Asian churches multiplied from eight to over eighty. In 1996 AAD changed its name to North American Pacific Asian Disciples to better signal its inclusive aspirations, and by 2000, Korean churches within NAPAD had grown numerous enough to form a sub-group called the Korean Disciples Convocation.

Given the above account of Asian-American Disciples since 1965, one might suppose coercive liminality no longer applies to them. That would be an unwarranted assumption. Many Asian Disciples still linger at the margin, though no longer owing to racist laws or attitudes (at least not explicit ones) but to their limited facility in English

14 By this time, the group's name had changed from American Asian Disciples to Asian American Disciples, upon the suggestion of Itoko Maeda, who had served as missionary in Latin America and argued for the more inclusive connotation of the latter term. Marilynne Hill has written a biography of this remarkable Disciple, *Itoko Maeda: Woman of Mission* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1997).

and their constrained economic circumstances – a reality readily seen in the life of NAPAD congregations “nesting” in Anglo churches. Nonetheless, it would be correct to say that Disciples have come a long way since 1924 or 1942. Now a Disciple is closer to becoming one *“who overcomes marginality without ceasing to be a marginal person.”*