

Pastoral Care in the Context of North American Asian Communities

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While acknowledging the historical functions of pastoral care as "healing, sustaining, guiding, and reconciling" (Clebsch and Jackie 1964, quoted in Clinebell 1984, 20), and that "pastoral care and counseling seek to empower growth toward wholeness in all of the six interdependent aspects of a person's life,"¹ this essay also takes seriously the critique that genuine pastoral care needs to move beyond helping individuals to cope with their crisis situations to getting involved in effecting social change to ameliorate and/or eradicate those unjust conditions that give rise to the problems in the first place (Pattison 1988).² The need to integrate a prophetic dimension of ministry into pastoral care is especially applicable in the case of racial-cultural minorities such as Asians in North America, since their opportunities for wholeness and growth—both as individuals and as communities—are often circumscribed by the often unjust treatment they receive in what is a predominantly white, Eurocentric, and still fairly patriarchal society.

External Factors

Asian Communities in North America and the *Han* of Systemic Racism

In discussing Asian communities here, I make no attempt to cover all of the people who have settled in North America from the whole range of countries

INJUSTICE AND THE CARE OF SOULS

TAKING OPPRESSION
SERIOUSLY
IN PASTORAL CARE

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across the continent of Asia from Afghanistan and Iran in the Middle East to the far eastern shores of Japan and Korea. Instead, I have dealt more modestly with those Asians now living in the United States and Canada who originally came from three significant regions: Far East Asia (China, Korea, and Japan); Southeast Asia (the Philippines, Vietnam-Cambodia-Laos, and Malaysia-Singapore); and to a lesser extent South Asia (India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh). As much as possible, I will use the term "Asian North American," a designation that gained prominence during the 1960s and 1970s as a term of resistance inspired by the U.S. civil rights movement, to refer to communities and individuals whose ancestors came from those regions, but who themselves were born in North America ("subsequent generations").

Historically, Chinese and Japanese laborers came as early as the mid-nineteenth century to California and British Columbia, first to try their luck in gold prospecting and then remaining to work in the lumber, fishery/canning, and other coastal industries. The earliest Koreans (1903), Filipinos, and East Indians came to work in the sugar cane plantations in Hawaii and to do other harsh and low-paying jobs. Historically, these were the groups who were discriminated against—not only by the exploitation of unfair labor practices, but also by discriminatory, oppressive legislation against them. Most notoriously, the latter included relocating Pacific Coast residents of Japanese ancestry (including citizens born in the United States or Canada) to internment camps during World War II, and passing a series of exclusion acts severely limiting and prohibiting would-be immigrants from entering the United States from Asia between 1882 and 1943. In Canada, one special ethnic group, the Chinese, was targeted with both an exclusion act and a "head tax."³ One can only imagine the accumulated suffering, mostly unarticulated and unrelieved, that shadowed the hard lives of these early Asian "sojourners."

The Korean concept of *han* aptly describes such suffering as "a critical wound," explains Korean American theologian Andrew Sung Park, "generated by unjust psychosomatic, social, political, economic, and cultural repression and oppression" (Park 2003, 42). Such *han* persisted even after many generations had struggled and succeeded in moving out of the urban ethnic ghettos of their ancestors, and even when the liberalization of immigration laws in both the United States and Canada after 1965 saw better educated and socioeconomically better-off Asian immigrants arriving in increasing numbers. At present, they are often regarded by the non-Asian U.S. population as the "model minority," a group who send their sons and daughters to Ivy League colleges and are believed to be steadily climbing up the social and corporate ladder by dint of

innate intelligence, disciplined hard work, and an enterprising spirit. Yet, as the criminal FBI investigation and solitary confinement (with no trial and no proof of guilt of being a spy) of Taiwan-born American citizen scientist Wen Ho Lee demonstrates, both naturalized and American-born Asian citizens continue to be perceived and treated by the majority population as outsiders and foreigners, even to the fourth and fifth generation.⁴ Such continuing discrimination and exclusion lie at the heart of much of the *han* endured by Asian communities and individuals. As Park points out, "In this so-called melting-pot society, Asian Americans have been unwelcome and 'unmeltable.' This enduring rejection by society is *han* for Asian Americans" (Park 2003, 42).

As a survival technique, North American Asians have had to come together in mutual help groups such as business associations and clan societies in traditional Japantowns and Chinatowns in San Francisco, New York, Vancouver, Toronto, Chicago, and Boston. Those who converted to Christianity in the early days, and who came as Christians after 1965, formed faith communities in which they could worship in their own language and pass on their cultural traditions to their children. In this way, "ethnic" churches extend pastoral care to one another. In a recent account, Su Yon Pak and others describe how Korean Americans come together in "ricing" communities to seek protection from the alienation and estrangement their members often experience. These Christian groups meet from house to house, sharing not only hospitality and food ("rice") but also exchanging news about family, friends, business, and church, as well as engaging in Bible study. In this way they provide mutual nurture physically, socially, and spiritually in a holistic care of the soul (Pak et al. 2005, 88–90).

To help strengthen the cultural identity of their younger members, Asian ethno-specific faith communities hold ancestral language classes so that younger generations do not totally lose their linguistic and cultural heritages. At the same time, these faith communities also provide care to newcomers such as refugees and recent immigrants by connecting them with social and government resettlement agencies to ease their integration into the host society. The most recent groups to follow this path are Southeast Asian refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. A case study of the establishment of new religious organizations of each of these national groups in California and New Orleans confirms the central motivation of "providing a sense of cultural identity and continuity to people who are struggling to make sense of new lives in a new world" (Zhou et al. 2002, 66; see also Warner and Wittner 1998; Yoo 1999; Ebaugh and Chafetz 2000; Iwamura and Spickard 2003).

Regarding the provision of pastoral care more specifically,

First generation Cambodians who suffer from post-traumatic stress and long-term depression as the result of war and resettlement can . . . turn to the monks for help. . . . Through offering mental and spiritual help, the temple contributes to the rebuilding of the Cambodian community. . . . By rebuilding the Khmer cultural heritage, the Cambodians are able to renew trust, rebuild their self-esteem and dignity, and achieve gradual reunification with each other. . . . (Zhou et al. 2002, 62)

Yet, owing to continued unequal acceptance by the majority society, many Asian North American Christians continue to meet in ethno-specific churches, even if they no longer need to communicate primarily in their ancestral languages. Such is the case with the movement among subsequent generations to form pan-Asian or multiethnic congregations where they can share their experiences, and where they can affirm their cultural roots and styles in safe sacred spaces (D. Ng 1996b).⁵ Supporting and strengthening such faith communities, therefore, is one way to provide pastoral care for these communities, something Protestant denominations also try to do by establishing Asian caucuses or ethnic specific ministries.⁶

Pastoral Response to the *Han* of Racism

To address effectively the *han* of racism for Asians and Asian North Americans, therefore, involves both individual action and structural change. In cases where members of a minority community suffer overt or covert racial harassment or discrimination, active advocacy and support in the form of backing up a victim's filing of a complaint and accompanying them through the process offers the more immediate kind of care that matters. Standing in solidarity with Asian Americans where there is a climate of "Asian bashing" is another expression of such care. To provide more "radical" care, however, the root causes of such discrimination must be addressed. Depending on the location of the potential caregiver, action can range from putting in place antiracism training to auditing existing employment practices to ensure employment equity for minorities in places where such legislation exists. It can take the form of working for legislation that facilitates the credentialing of immigrant professionals (how many times, in our respective states or provinces, have we talked to immigrant taxicab drivers from South Asia who turned out to be physicians or lawyers or holders of other advanced academic degrees?).

These long-term efforts involve whole institutions, whether they be business, academic, nonprofit organizations, or churches. In fact, moving a church body such as one's own denomination from the initial stage of being an "exclusive" church and a church of the status quo through the intermittent stages of being a self-declared "open" and "awakening" church, to actually redefining itself and finally becoming a "transformed church" where diversity is seen as an asset incorporating the interests and gifts of diverse racial-cultural constituents in its mission and ministry, policy and practices, may elude most of the institutions we know today.⁷

Healing the Internalized Racism of Asians and Asian North Americans

A further response in attempting to release and resolve the *han* of racial discrimination for Asians/Asian North Americans (as indeed for other racial-ethnic minority persons), is to bring about their souls' healing at a more fundamental level by uncovering the insidious harm caused by internalized racism. This kind of injustice oppresses by making its victims doubt their own worth and the worth of their racial-ethnic peers: it is like a "poison that seeps into the psyche of people of color and aboriginals," leading them to accept Eurocentric values as superior and indeed as universal "norm" (G. Ng 2004b, 81). It can be seen as the opposite of the equally damaging "invisible knapsack" of white privilege lodged unconsciously in the psyche and socialized into the behavior of white folk (McIntosh 1990/1998).

The Rev. Wesley Mubasa, a Methodist minister from South Africa, told the story of how once, upon boarding a flight to Kenya, he found himself growing nervous upon discovering that the pilot was African rather than white/European. Mubasa confessed that he had been shocked by the realization that he had internalized within his psyche the superiority accorded white people (hence pilots) the world over, and how spiritually damaging such internalization could be. His story, told in a small group at an antiracism workshop, had the effect of freeing a participant to share her own story of how she was once reluctant to be seen reading a newspaper in Chinese on the subway ride home, even though she had wanted to read the Chinese version of a news story that had originated from China the day before.⁸

Internalized racism often takes the form of a "hierarchy of color," whereby the lighter skinned (and therefore closer to appearing "white") get better treatment than the darker skinned, even within the same racial-cultural group. Among Asians, for example, fairer-skinned Chinese, Korean, or Japanese, Middle Easterners,

and Southeast Asians like the Vietnamese or Hmong, are seen as higher on the color hierarchy than darker-skinned Filipinos/as and South Asians. White or fair-skinned Latinos/as would occupy a higher position than African Americans and black Canadians (whether they be descendants of United Empire Loyalist ancestors moving to eastern Canada in the 1700s or immigrants from the Caribbean), ending with darker, more recent refugees from the continent of Africa on the lowest end. How to recognize one's complicity in benefiting from such a hierarchy and working actively to expose its injustice becomes both an educational and pastoral imperative for people of color (G. Ng 1996a, 229–37; 2004b, 40–50; D. W. Sue 2003, 254–76; 2004, 49–50). The post–Rodney King strife in south central Los Angeles involving African Americans, Hispanics, and Korean shopkeepers showed not only how injustices of class and race intersect, but also how cross-racial hostility perpetuates the *lun* of one minority group against another.

One specific area of minority relating requiring both repentance and education on the part of Asians in North America involves learning how to relate in a just manner to Native Americans/Canadians (the current acceptable term in Canada is “Aboriginal”) in light of the shameful history of colonization, land appropriation, plus linguistic/cultural genocide and physical and sexual abuse in boarding/residential schools of native peoples in both Canada and the United States. In this case, the attempt to establish “right relationships” can result in healing, not only for the victimized and abused, but also for Asians in North America who share the guilt by benefiting from the legacy of white settlement in these lands (United Church of Canada 2000; G. Ng 2007).

Tensions and Injustices within Asian North American Communities

Oppression from external forces is not the only kind faced by persons of Asian heritage: within their own families, churches, and communities members with less social power—namely, those who are younger in age (whether male or female), those who happen to be girls or women, and those of lower economic status—usually find themselves having to submit to the wishes of more senior members, male members, or members of a higher economic class. This is especially true of those ethnic groups originating in East Asia among whom Confucian values are still viably strong, namely, Chinese—including Vietnamese who are ethnically Chinese—Japanese, and Koreans. The Confucian ideal is to achieve “harmony” in family and social relationships by following strictly a

set of values tending toward the “high context” end of the values continuum; prizing collective belonging (family, community) and interdependence over individual independence; hierarchical ways of relating and respect for seniority and authority over egalitarian relating; and domination of males over females with clearly defined gender roles for each, to mention just the major values.⁹ This is, however, not meant to imply that similar values do not apply to South Asian (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Sri Lankan) communities.

Tensions between the Generations

When we place these high context values over against “low context” values on the other end of the continuum prevalent in modern Western society—values that more acculturated second and subsequent generations are apt to espouse—inevitable tensions arise between younger generations and more “traditional” first-generation immigrant parents, grandparents, and elders in the community, who benefit from the Confucian concept of “filial piety” that continues to be practiced in the Asian diaspora. For young persons up to college years, family pressure to excel in school (a combination of Confucian valuing of education and “workaholicism” and the myth of Asian Americans as the “model minority”) becomes a source of intrafamily oppression, bringing an extra dimension to the usual teen angst of testing limits and attempts at asserting autonomy—what Korean American pastoral theologian Young Lee Hertig calls a “cultural tug of war.”¹⁰

For young adults, issues involving career choice (“Doctor or Lawyer?” as one of the authors of *Following Jesus without Dishonoring Your Parents* puts it [Yep et al. 1998]) and mate selection and marriage (with overt and covert pressure to marry within one’s ethnic group) easily become occasions where personal preferences and choice come up against parental preferences and decisions.¹¹

One peculiar oppression in immigrant Korean families described by Young Lee Hertig pertains to faith practice or family devotions, where parents trying to impose rigid programs of “faithing” at home by insisting on practices they themselves regard as the only valid ones, such as family prayer time and family Bible reading in Korean, and proscribing any “work,” including studying, on Sundays, without negotiating with their children or taking the latter’s needs and wishes into account (Lee Hertig 2001, 90–97).

This kind of tension extends beyond the family to the church, where “1.5” and second-generation English-speaking worshipping youth and young adults experience similar power dynamics between themselves and the first-generation

heritage-language-speaking portion of the same congregation. Where matters of faith are concerned, first-generation leaders (pastors, elders) often expect younger people to "assimilate to the first generation's cultural expression of faith and [to] regard that faith as sacred" (ibid. 107). At the same time, decisions about church government and congregational practice, programming and use of space, may be made without adequate consultation with younger members: even when there is representation on the church board or parish council, younger members may not be able to participate fully if meetings are always conducted in the ancestral language. English service pastors and workers are often marginalized. When conflict arises, tensions are exacerbated by divergent styles of managing conflict. More traditional older members prefer a nonconfrontational, more indirect style while keeping any conflict within the church family to "save face." Younger, more acculturated members would normally not hesitate to be direct or confrontational with their peers, and might accept the mediation of an outside consultant, but might feel constrained to fall in with their elders' ways so as not to appear disobedient or disrespectful, thus adding to their inner frustration (G. Ng 1997b, 206).

Pastoral Response for Generational Tensions

What kind of pastoral care response is called for in a generational tension/conflict situation? Asian American psychologists Derald Wing Sue and David Sue point out the importance of involving the family, not just the individual, in cases of family conflict, and of opting for a more actively engaged role (including that of educator or advocate in contrast to the usual, more objective, "neutral" role) for social service providers. Such advice can be useful for pastoral caregivers as well (Sue and Sue 2003a). In the case of parental pressure for academic success, for instance, it may be necessary to help parents, and indeed the wider ethnic community, to realize that they can be proud of their children's nonacademic achievements as well. In the related matter of parental pressure to conform to a narrow range of professions and careers (medicine, law, the hard sciences) versus individual children's personal gifts and desires (the arts, the humanities, or some kind of helping profession), Derald Wing Sue and David Sue suggest framing this kind of conflict as a culture conflict issue and trying to present the child's case to the parents (ibid., 328–42).

Ironically, disapproval seems to be particularly severe when children of Christian parents show signs of desiring to opt for some kind of Christian ministry. By pointing out that, from a faith perspective, such pressures and attempts to control the next generation's lives could be interpreted as usurping

God's place in their children's lives and thus seen as being idolatrous, pastors have an opportunity to tend to the spiritual health of the older generation as well as the real-life, professional/career and emotional/psychological needs of the younger. Such attention to the "soul health" of both generations requires of caregivers a "bicultural" (awareness of the cultures of both generations) sensitivity.

Addressing the *Han* of Asian/Asian North American Women in Family and Church

Valuing the male over the female (*zong nan quing nu* in Chinese, or *nan jo nu bi* in Korean) is the major thrust of gender relations in a society governed by Confucian values.¹² One traditional manifestation is that of "the three obediences" ("Obey your father [when not yet married], obey your husband [when married], obey your son [when widowed]"). Even though the more extreme forms of these injustices may no longer be legal or practicable when transported to North America (for instance, the obliteration of women's names once they are married, the custom of *sati* or widow burning in India, or the abandonment of girl babies in contemporary China), an overarching patriarchal ethos still obtains among the Asian communities of present-day United States and Canada. In serious cases, such continued subordination of women could result in domestic violence, especially in homes of recent immigrants in which husbands feel they are "losing face" by seeing their wives find employment and advancement while they themselves remain unemployed or underemployed, as documented in the case of Korean women in urban areas (Sung-Kim 1992).

In most Asian churches in North America, such an overall ethos is coupled with a conservative theological stance and a tendency toward literal interpretations of Bible passages such as Ephesians 5:22–24 ("Wives, be subject to your husbands . . .") to justify patriarchal attitudes and behaviors. Abetted by an atonement theology that sanctions endurance and suffering modeled on Christ's sacrifice on the cross, women's *han* is reinforced by pastors who counsel uncomplaining endurance, or forgiveness when sought by an apparently repentant spouse over and over again, rather than seeking a way out of the abusive situation.¹³

One way *nan jo nu bi* is expressed in Asian churches lies in the way women's leadership in the church is often confined to traditionally acceptable roles of service, whether at table, in fundraising activities such as running the annual bazaar/rummage sale, and in teaching church school. In many Korean North American churches, women may still not be ordained as elders, the most powerful spiritual office to which a layperson can aspire in a Presbyterian congregation. And, in spite

of the increasing number of women of Asian heritage graduating from theological schools in this new century, they are only rarely ordained to serve professionally in Asian churches; instead they end up working in their denominational structures, or serving "majority" Anglo-American/Canadian congregations.¹⁴

Feminists contend that pastoral care for women and girls is "care in the context of justice," the premise on which this volume is based. Such soul care "listens to voices that are easily thrust aside" and, as in cases of sexually abused women or women suffering from domestic violence, not only takes care of the immediate and material needs ("dressing the wounds") but actually becomes an ally of the victim (Bons-Storm 1996, 202). In cases of Asian women's thwarted leadership potential, responses could include helping women to "choose their battles," inviting them to develop a holistic spirituality and to act as role models and mentors (G. Ng 2002). A further, and more radical (in the sense of getting at the root of things) pastoral response is to open up possibilities of interpreting Scripture in ways that are life-giving for women. It could be a simple lifting up the roles of women leaders in the early church such as Prisca, Phoebe, and Junia (Acts 18:1-4 and 24-26; 1 Cor. 16:19; Rom. 16:1-2), or more complex attempts at analyzing how ethnically nondominant women (Rahab, the Syrophenician woman) have been traditionally represented and what alternative interpretations might be.¹⁵

One area that Asian Christians, both women and men, have tended to ignore is the matter of gender-inclusive language. One reason for this is that many Asian languages have gender-inclusive terms for humanity (for example, *ren* in Chinese) and no gender distinctions for the third person singular (he/she). What they do not realize is that father/lord language and images continue to reinforce hierarchical, repressive relationships between the divine and the human, which then get transferred to human males in the community. Raising consciousness around this current "null curriculum" in Asian communities then becomes a radical act of soul care.¹⁶

Resources for Pastoral/Soul Care in Asian North American Communities

Asian North American churches extend pastoral care not only to their own members, but often also to persons from their ethno-cultural and immigrant communities. How Christian resources shape the approach of such care, whether consciously or unconsciously, has consequences in that care's effectiveness.

Reading and Interpreting Scripture from the Experience of Victims/the Colonized

Pastoral care workers in a Christian setting often rely on the Bible to comfort and heal those people who are in pain. Yet the Bible as a resource can be an ambiguous one. Depending on how it is interpreted, the Bible could be liberating or oppressive not only for girls and women, but also for "racialized" minorities, including Asian men and seniors, as pointed out by postcolonial biblical scholars R. S. Sugirtharajah, Musa Dube, and others (Sugirtharajah 1998, 2001, 2003; Dube 2000).¹⁷ Traditional interpretations that follow the Bible's usual recounting of a narrative from the point of view of the victors (for instance, that of the Israelites over against that of the Canaanites in the story of the entry into Canaan, the "promised land" for the former only) ignore, or at least neglect, the experience of those who are victims or conquered. For those suffering personal or systemic injustices, therefore, a different way of reading the Bible—learning to uncover its problematic, contradictory nature and learning to read it from the margins over against from the center—is crucial.¹⁸

For Asian North American Christians, most of whom have inherited their Christianity from the Western missionary involvement in their home countries, indigenous spiritual traditions and practices have also been devalued or prohibited outright. Learning to reread and reinterpret traditional "mission texts" (for instance, "the great commission" in Matt. 28:28-30) to uncover their imperialistic orientation and harmful effects on the "missioned to" can help to restore the dignity of these colonized Christians and make whole their multilayered spiritual legacies (Dube 1998, 2002).

Doing Theology from the Side of the Sinned Against

"For the past two thousand years," declare Korean American theologian Andrew Sung Park and Susan L. Nelson, "we have inadequately treated the victims of by neglecting to formulate doctrines for them . . ." (Park and Nelson 2001a, 2). A more adequate formulation will focus on the need of the sinned against to resolve their *ham* rather than on the need of the sinner or perpetrator of injustice to absolve their guilt. Park invites us to notice that in teaching his disciples to pray, Jesus was doing so from the perspective of those who had been offended, since only these could be asked to forgive others: ". . . the forgiving of the injustice of the oppression precedes the forgiveness of God for the oppressed. Had Jesus been concerned about the oppressors, he would have said that . . . you must

ask the forgiveness of others (your victims) prior to asking God's forgiveness." (Park 2001, 55). To do theology from this perspective can and should result in concrete ecclesial practices, including ethical decisions, faith formation, and church education, pastoral counseling, and liturgy. In Park and Nelson's volume *The Other Side of Sin*, theologian Marie Fortune is quoted as lifting up the call of a theological conviction that "asks us to side with the victim who beckons bystanders to action, engagement, and remembering," while Ruth Duck is quoted as calling for "hospitality for victims" in worship with the double-sided potential of the Eucharist/Holy Communion "as an act of confession for sinners, of forgiveness for violators, but as a medium of welcoming into the community of faith or celebrating joy, life, abundance, community, and grace for healing the wounded" (Park and Nelson 2001a, 18–20).

Integrating Asian Religio-Cultural Practices with Christian Practices

One powerful resource in the spiritual care of Christians of Asian ancestry is to recognize and affirm important rituals they still practice in their lives by "institutionalizing" these rituals in the life of their faith community. Russell Jeung describes how a memorial ritual (still practiced by most families on the anniversary of the deaths of family members) has become part of the monthly communion service at Park Avenue United Methodist Church in New York City. At such a service, the pastor reads out the names of those who have died in the same month either that year or in years past, telling a little of their lives, and having a child place a flower in a bowl for each person remembered. This ritual accomplishes several things. First, it makes concrete for children the connection with elders and ancestors of their community; second, locating such a central Asian spiritual practice in a Christian liturgical setting, such as the Eucharist or Holy Communion, legitimizes what may be seen as a "pagan" cultural practice by linking it to the Christian concept of the Communion of Saints; and, third but not least, it helps with the grieving process (Jeung 2005, 132–33).

Cultural festivals, which are filled with religious meaning, are also resources when they both honor the identity of those who practice them and interlace them with Christian meaning, as when the annual Chinese spring festival of *Qing-ming* ("Clear and Bright"), commemorating ancestors by cleaning up their graves and its autumn counterpart *Qong-yang* ("Double Nine"), is linked to the ideas of "rising again" (Easter) and the Communion of Saints around All Saints Day (G. Ng 1989, 1996c, 2006).

Connections between the living and their dead are themselves a resource for spiritual care in the lives of Asian American Canadians. Sociologist of religion Jung Ha Kim has made an interesting study of the relationship of "ghosts" to the protagonists of Asian American fiction and their effect on the latter's spiritual life. Kim points out that ghosts are "at once marginal and central to the protagonists. The ghosts guide, critique, sustain, and heal the protagonists. . . . By selectively remembering the painful past at times and by learning to tell their own 'talk-stories' at other times, the protagonists demonstrate the spirituality of resistance and resilience in Asian America" (J. H. Kim 2006, 246; Brock et al. 2007). At the same time, Kim's use of fiction "for better understanding a racialized people's construction of reality" (J. H. Kim 2006, 247 n.1) is a powerful reminder of the resource literature depicting the experience of Asian Americans/Canadians and how significant an influence this literature can be for these people in their search for meaning in their lives as well as for the healing of painful memories. Where feasible, encouraging people who have suffered injustice to write their own life narratives can be a viable and empowering pastoral and spiritual strategy (G. Ng 2003).

Racial-Cultural Identity and Social Location of the Pastoral Caregiver

Pastoral care to individuals within an Asian ethnic or faith community in North America is likely to be given by persons of a similar ethno-cultural group. In areas where persons of Asian origin do not congregate in significant numbers, however, non-Asian pastors, pastoral visitors, or counselors will be called upon to extend care. Because relations between persons may vary according not only to cultural styles and values but also to a differential in social power, it is important to be aware of the dynamics that occur between pastoral caregivers and recipients so that such relationships do not themselves become oppressive.

When these identities are similar, it is generally assumed that caregiving will likely be culturally appropriate and therefore effective. Someone who understands the communal orientation of most Asians, for instance, is less likely to ignore the family in any encounter with an individual. Such an assumption may not always be correct. Owing to the pervasive Western-oriented clinical pastoral education and training given to everyone, pastors/pastoral caregivers of Asian heritage may find that the approach they have learned will be inappropriate in spite of the identification the person receiving the care may feel. Canadian Lutheran pastor Alan Lai discovered this to his dismay when he applied what he had learned in

his CPE course to his visit to a hospitalized female Chinese immigrant woman. The emphasis on getting the patient to articulate how she was feeling just did not work because of the accepted Chinese behavioral norm of not sharing emotions and feelings verbally—and certainly not with strangers (Lai 2003).

Another challenge is the power differential between pastoral caregiver and recipient/s even of the same ethno-cultural group. Thus, a senior male pastor (and most pastors in Asian and Asian American churches are still male), unless he is very careful, may bring his own "high context" orientation to any guidance he might give. In a situation involving career choice, he might unconsciously privilege parental authority over the children's struggle for autonomy. A dilemma arises when the pastor/pastoral caregiver is a younger male ministering to older males, or when a woman pastor/pastoral caregiver (even if older) ministers to males. The most challenging case would be when the pastor is both younger and female.

Both cultural identity and power differential also apply to the care extended on a North American college/university campus, in a hospital, or the only Presbyterian church in town, by a chaplain or pastor (or pastoral care team) of non-Asian ethno-cultural heritage as they engage in pastoral care with students, patients, and church members, some of whom may be Asian or Asian North American. Society in both the United States and Canada today continues to accord more social power ("involuntary" power ascribed to individuals without their earning or even wanting it) to persons of Anglo-European origin (and thus "white"), whether born in North America or not, whose native or at least working tongue is English, than to persons of non-Anglo-Euro descent, or who are recent immigrants for whom English is their second or third language. Indeed, so significant is the "race" factor that such power discrepancy would persist even if the latter were born in North America and had functioned in English all their lives, or even if their educational background and socioeconomic standing were equivalent.¹⁹

When such power differential exists between a white pastoral caregiver and a nonwhite recipient, there is danger of racial and cultural oppression/injustice even if perpetuated unintentionally. Conversely, when the pastor or pastoral caregiver is a racial minority, the dynamics would be reversed: there might be discomfort or resistance in students, patients, and church members who are of Anglo-Euro ancestry to accepting pastoral care from someone whom they have been socialized to regard as less authoritative.

Power differential exists, therefore, not only to position and authority, but also to white privilege. Whites have been socialized from earliest childhood to regard the way things operate in the world in their style and favor as "the norm." When the knapsack of white privilege remains invisible, white pastoral caregivers

may inadvertently engage in cultural oppression when dealing with Asian North American and other nonwhite persons. It is therefore imperative that antiracism training be mandatory for all service providers, including pastoral caregivers. Central to such training would be an understanding of white racial identity development so that individuals could locate themselves on the continuum and ultimately develop a nonracist or racially just identity.²⁰

Such a nonracist identity would be indispensable in developing cultural and multicultural/intercultural competence, a viable vehicle in moving toward achieving greater justice in intercultural soul care. Derald Wing Sue lists four components of cultural competence for social workers, which would be just as applicable to pastoral caregivers and educators. These are: (1) becoming aware of one's own assumptions, values, and biases about human behavior (awareness of one's own Euro ethnocentric monoculturalism); (2) understanding the worldview of culturally diverse clients (knowledge); (3) developing appropriate intervention strategies and techniques (skills); and (4) understanding organizational and institutional forces that enhance or negate cultural competence (sociopolitical know-how). Culturally aware service providers (or pastoral caregivers) will not impose their values or standards, which unaware ones would see as superior, on culturally diverse groups, nor would they regard differences as being deviant. Instead, they will respect cultural differences, including accepting indigenous approaches to healing (D. W. Sue 2006, 23–40).

Persons from the dominant culture whose consciousness has been raised and who are on the journey toward developing an antiracist identity can be strong pastoral care providers to "racialized" Asians and Asian North Americans on an individual level, and eventually come to be real advocates and allies as they work for structural change in the institutions whose policies and practices discriminate against minorities. Such alliances are particularly crucial in attempting any structural change. The power in most, if not all, institutions in our present context is concentrated in the hands of European American/Canadians. White allies working within institutions will attempt to move these institutions from being monocultural and exclusive to being truly inclusive or multicultural, with intermediate stages of being merely passive or nondiscriminatory.²¹

Looking Beyond the Present

As North American society in the twenty-first century becomes more pluralistic in both racial-ethnic and multifaith makeup because of globalization and increased

immigration from the South, Christian communities can learn to redefine and reframe traditional faith stances and practices, including their practices in pastoral/spiritual/soul care, toward repentance for past injustices and working toward greater justice. Asian communities in the United States and Canada exemplify only one aspect of this new changing context. It is also important to point out that in such a contemporary context, there is no longer any homogeneity even within the same ethno-cultural groups, no "cultural essentialism," since cultural change is accelerated by global migration. As cultural critic Lisa Lowe reminds us, "interpreting Asian American culture exclusively in terms of the master narratives of generational conflict and filial relation essentializes Asian American culture, obscuring the particularities and incommensurabilities of class, gender, and national diversities among Asians" (Lowe 2003, 135).

INJUSTICE AND THE CARE OF SOULS

TAKING OPPRESSION
SERIOUSLY
IN PASTORAL CARE

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