

Journeying as church together

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In early March, I received an email from Judith Roberts, Senior Director for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion for the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). Concerned about the growing racist attacks against Asian Americans, she and the Presiding Bishop Elizabeth Eaton wanted to reach out to us, the Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders-ELCA (AAPI for short) asking how they can be a support and work in solidarity with us.

Within a few days, in a fortunate stroke of serendipity, the ELCA publicized our [AAPI statement](#) to address the increase in violence directed toward Asian American and Pacific Islander communities. The statement, which called for congregations to declare a Day of Lament to stand in solidarity against anti-Asian racism, was endorsed by the Conference of Bishops at a virtual meeting.

At that time, there were over 3,000 reported incidents of anti-Asian racism, according to Stop AAPI Hate, an initiative that tracks violence and harassment among Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. To date, that number has increased to over 6,700. The incidents include being stopped, berated, pushed, harassed, coughed at, spat upon, stabbed, poured acid on, shot, killed, and blamed for Covid-19, causing tremendous trauma and anxiety among Asian and Pacific Islanders.

True to their intention to work in solidarity with AAPI, the ELCA staff worked with us to help develop a worship resource for [A Day of Lament Against Anti-Asian Racism](#) and an accompanying video of the Embodied Blessing and Healing Prayer as demonstrated by Asian leaders representing different caucuses. It was truly a collaborative effort with the director for worship and publicity team. They listened well, making sure that the resource we shared came out the way we intended.

What a contrast to the lack of support our Asian elders experienced in the early years of Asian ministry! We have had a long history of being treated as the 'other' not only in the country but also in the church. There was a time in the 1950s when a predecessor body of this church thought it best to keep the 'Orientals' (pertaining to the Japanese Americans who were incarcerated during World War II) separate as the presence of the Japanese would be 'embarrassing' to existing Lutheran congregations. AAPI's newly published book *Behold the Stream*¹ speaks of our history experiencing institutional racism in a white church and how, despite difficulties, the early Asian leaders persisted, adapted, and worked in creative ways to keep on spreading the gospel to our Asian siblings and serving the church in a variety of ways.

The early years (1970s) were fraught with challenges, both internal and external, as the Asian pastors (primarily Chinese and Japanese) demanded inclusion in the life of the church. While insisting that the wider church take them as Asian Americans seriously,

¹ Edmond Yee and Lily R. Wu, eds., *Behold the Stream: A History of Asian Lutheran Witness* (Chicago, IL: Association of Asians and Pacific Islanders, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2020).

they had to work to heal their sacred wounds brought about by historical conflicts in their countries of origin. For example, the Japanese American community wanted justice for the incarceration and racist treatment their people received when the United States was at war with Japan. Yet the Chinese elders remembered the atrocities that the Japanese soldiers committed in China and to the Chinese during the war.²

Still, despite their differences, they persisted on working together through church mergers and common ministry challenges. Brought together by Christ who loved and came for all humanity, they modelled what they wanted to see in the church by opening the association to include all Asian and Pacific Islander Lutherans.³ While the AAPI membership is primarily Asian, the US Census Bureau's definition of Asian or Pacific Islander is a person with origin in any culture of East Asia, Southeast Asia, Indian subcontinent, or Pacific Islands.

The AAPI is structured into caucuses representing people who are of Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Korean, Hmong, Laotian, Indian/South Indian, Filipino, Myanmar, and Cambodian descent. While these groups may have conflicts in their countries of origin, our gatherings (both national and international) are rich opportunities to tell our stories in a safe environment, share educational resources and best practices, engage in theological discussions, showcase our traditional songs and dances, support one another, dine in fellowship, and simply be the beloved people God wants us to be. For Asians, there is a fluid connection between Asians who live in the US and the countries from which they came as expressed in the well-attended Asian Lutheran International Conference events held every two years.

However, because Asians are so diverse in culture, language, ethnicity, economics, and religion, we face unique challenges which we must address to thrive. What would it take to advance Asian ministries in the church? Several Asian theologians and community leaders were asked this question at a virtual meeting. They identified four areas that are challenges and opportunities for growth:⁴

- 1) We need suitable theologies and a relevant theological education system for our community.
- 2) We need to develop ways to attract and provide support to young leaders and walk with pastors and leaders who are bi-vocational for lack of funding.
- 3) We need to articulate an Asian and an Asian American and Asian American Lutheran identity and rediscover Asian spiritualities as well as interact with believers of other faiths.
- 4) We need to embody and provide accompaniment to second and third generations, deal with our internal diversity and diversity within the ELCA and connect ourselves with being part of the institution. Moreover, we need to deal with patriarchy, walk with vulnerable communities, including Asian undocumented persons, and address justice issues for ourselves and others, including racism within our community.

Over the years, our contemporary Asian Lutheran leaders and theologians and leaders have been taking steps to address these challenges. Educational opportunities offered

² Yee and Wu, *Behold the Stream*, 167.

³ Yee and Wu, *Behold the Stream*, 171.

⁴ Yee and Wu, *Behold the Stream*, 212–216.

through the Theological Education for Emerging Ministries (TEEM), the Asian Theological Summer Institute and the Asian Evangelist project are highly relevant to Asians preparing for leadership in the church. The AAPI has produced close to thirty publications for ministry in English and several Asian languages. While two-thirds of Asian Lutherans are worshipping in white congregations, our Asian congregations and ministries offer unique ministries to immigrant/refugee population and worship in multiple languages.

Looking at the bigger picture, the ELCA is 96% white; 4% people of colour. To move forward together as church, we need to be willing to be pushed out of our comfort zone to make space for everyone at the table. When we, as church, awaken to truly love all our siblings as Jesus loves us, we move into a collective awareness that we are all connected, that what hurts one hurts all of us.

The AAPI is one of six ethnic associations in the ELCA. Five represent people of colour (African, American Indian and Alaska Native, Latino, Arabic and Middle Eastern, and Asian); the one representing those of European Descent exists to be advocates for racial justice.

Several years ago, when the ethnic association leaders met, the people of colour shared stories of pain and frustration towards church leadership. They felt disconnected, invalidated, and not heard. They spoke in terms of 'we' and 'they'. Then, we decided to do something different. Instead of just speaking for our own associations, we decided to advocate for each other and speak with one voice so that the church would hear us. Our first joint venture was to write one letter signed by all the ethnic association presidents to the presiding bishop and churchwide leaders requesting to restore funding so that each ethnic association can have representation at churchwide council meetings. The request was approved! Since then, the ethnic association presidents have continued to work together. We meet virtually on a regular basis to deepen our relationships and use our collective voice for advocacy.

Our work together contributed to the creation of a task force that produced the document '[Strategy for Authentic Diversity](#)' which addresses the challenges of becoming an authentically multi-ethnic, multicultural church. Taking on this challenge will require commitment and a systemic change within the church. It will take all of us to get there. Slowly, we are learning to be church together,—a church that is willing to engage new, young and diverse people, a church that is rooted in Christ and radically relevant, a church that looks more like the multicultural church on the first Pentecost.

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