



Anna Howard Shaw Center

NEWSLETTER

VOLUME 24 ♦ ISSUE 2 ♦ SPRING/SUMMER 2008

WOMEN IN THE WORLD 2008

Amanda Norris

Decorated with candles, confetti, river stones, multicultural fabrics, and flags from around the world, the Colloquium Room on the 9th floor of the Photonics Center was an inviting and festive location for this year's Women in the World Conference. Students, faculty, pastors, and lay persons gathered together for a two-day conversation about the challenges facing immigrant women and the churches that sustain them. The conference started with introductory presentations by each of our researchers—Rev. Yoo-Yun Cho-Chang, Rev. Laurel Scott, Rev. Dr. Aida Irizarry-Fernandez,

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Women in the World 2008 participants

FUNCTION OF KOREAN CHURCH IN AMERICA

Choi Hee An

Our researchers and I have continued to conduct research about immigrant congregations for the last three years; many friends of the Anna Howard Shaw Center have deeply supported us. We presented our research as a panel for the American Academy of Religion last November and were warmly received by many scholars and students. Now we have just finished our own conference: Women in the World 2008,

"Immigrant Women: Singing God's Song in a New Choir." With amazing worship experiences, we shared our tears, understood and accepted our differences, and recognized our challenges. I will share part of my findings in this article.

The Korean church has many different functions and plays many roles in immigrant lives. There are five services that I want to share in this

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Dr. M.T. Davila, and Rev. Dr. Choi Hee An. After our lunch of Chinese cuisine, Dr. Davila and Rev. Irizarry-Fernandez gave a poignant and provocative presentation on the plight of Latina migrant ministries. In the afternoon, Rev. Dr. Choi and Rev. Cho-Chang conveyed the character and purpose of the Korean immigrant church as well as the challenges confronting that community. In accord with the Conference's title, "Immigrant Women: Singing God's Song in a New Choir," the first day ended in joyous song as the Boston University Seminary Singers performed a piece in Korean and first-year seminarian Shelby Condray lead the assembly in the Spiritual "Over My Head."

Friday morning began with a peaceful and reflective opening worship lead by board member Cherlyn Gates. Rev. Scott and guests followed

with an informative and inspiring presentation on the experience of African immigrant women. After lunch, Rev. Dr. Choi led a discussion in which participants shared their responses to the presentations; many women were moved to tears as they spoke. Dorcas, an exuberant

stands as a bridge between secure society and the precarious existence of the international pilgrim. Juliana, a young woman from Cameroon, shared her harrowing journey from her native home, her attempt to rebuild her life in America, and her experience with discrimination and

Mother and minister Gabriella Garcia shared her challenge and desire "not to lose the joy of life and to see in everyone the image of God."

Kenyan woman who made a point of telling every woman she greeted that they were "fearfully and wonderfully made," related her experiences with oppression, corrupt lawyers, sickness, loneliness, and displacement. Tearfully and emphatically, she thanked Rev. Scott and Rev. Irizarry-Fernandez and "every brother and sister" who

prison. Mother and minister Gabriella Garcia shared her challenge and desire "not to lose the joy of life and to see in everyone the image of God." She spoke of the need to appreciate all cultures and types of beauty and described the reality of heaven as "beauty, goodness, truth, acceptance, and love."

Afterward, board members Rev. Nizzi Digan and Rev. Irizarry-Fernandez led the gathering in a beautiful liturgy. In a moving and tearful ceremony, women placed stones along a symbolic path to freedom in honor of immigrants in the midst of trial, pastors and lay persons engaged in the fight for justice, and numerous individuals now struggling against oppressive systems. The conference concluded in joyful singing as participants danced forward to receive communion. Truly embodying the theme of the conference, the assembly retired from the retreat encouraged and uplifted with new friends in hand and a new song in their hearts.



Conference attendees dance forward to receive communion from Rev. Aida Irizarry-Fernandez and Rev. Nizzi Digan.



article—economic, political-legal, educational, recreational, and health.

Economic Services Because of their limited English, many Korean immigrants do not have immediate access to a job; the church is a social networking place where they can access employment opportunities through personal and communal connections. The majority of interviewees received a job at Korean-run establishments and settled down with the help of church members and pastors.

Political-Legal Services Many immigrants experience culture shock when trying to understand American social and political structures and subsequently have a hard time securing their legal status; they can get the most help from the church. In the case of political or racial struggle, they gather in church to exchange information and prepare strategies against racially unjust policies and social discrimination. When there is friction between Koreans and other races, immigrants can gather at church and find ways to protect Korean ethnicities; they can also participate in local, denominational, and regional events and programs there. Many women mentioned that when they were hosting denominational gatherings and conferences, they felt fulfilled and a part of American society. These women, not just as individuals but as one, are open to relationships with other ethnic groups and through the church they are able to do more local volunteer work for the community.

Educational Services Koreans use the church as a major education center for both the first and second gen-



Rev. Dr. Choi Hee An leads a conference discussion session.

erations. For the first generation, some churches teach classes on English and also American culture; for the second, many churches offer Korean language classes and programs on Korean history and culture. Through these programs, the church has tried to close the cultural and language gap between the first and second generations.

Recreational Services Korean people love to get together and hang out; after worship or a church meeting, they gather and go somewhere else together. In the United States, however, they often have limited access to recreational facilities because of financial, psychological, and cultural differences with American society. The church tries to explore different

options such as athletic facilities for golfing and peaceful areas for retreats. Especially for seniors, church is often the only way to enjoy mobile access, sightseeing opportunities, and good food in restaurants.

Health Services According to statistics on immigrant health care, Koreans are the most uninsured among the five Asian/Asian American groups even though they have significant economic and educational achievement. Because of their eastern style of medicine, various religious beliefs, and language barriers, Korean immigrants often refuse to go to American hospitals. Again, church is a place where they can talk about their health and ask Korean doctors to treat them. Every year, churches help their members get vaccinations and educate them about the public health system.

Through these five services and others, the Korean church has provided indispensable support and service to Korean immigrants. An exploration of the challenges both within and without the Korean immigrant community—and how we might respond collectively to those obstacles—will follow in the next edition of this newsletter.



INTERCONTINENTAL FAMILIES

Laurel Scott



Rev. Laurel Scott presents her research on African immigrant women.

Data collected from interviews with twenty Ghanaian and ten Haitian immigrant church women yielded rich information about lives both inside and outside the church. For this presentation, I selected responses to four of the twelve questions asked.

The first question focused on the participants' decisions to come to the U.S. and the difficulties they experienced during their transition into a new culture. There was a notable difference between the way the women from Haiti approached the answer to this question and the way the Ghanaian women did. Nine out of ten Haitian women responded by first stating the number of years they had been living in the U.S., which ranged from four to twenty-four years. The Ghanaian women tended to initially respond with the *reason* they came to the U.S.; only one of them mentioned the number of years she had lived here. For eleven out of twenty, the decision to come to the

U.S. was centered around family reunification (husbands and, in one instance, a brother had already done so). Family reunification was also the main reason that women from Haiti came, but the family member joined

was more often a child, sibling, or extended family (aunt/uncle or cousin and, in one instance, a friend). Although the question did not include the reason for coming, participants gave it anyway—to have a better life (a phrase used by half the respondents), to get an education, or to get a better job and earn money to help family back home. Several mothers talked about securing improved status for their children and the need for child and health care.

Difficulties transitioning to this culture mainly centered around language. Haitians speak Creole, and although English is a common language in Ghana, several regional and tribal dialects are spoken in addition to English. Some women spoke of job difficulties as the most trying part of the transition, others said it was language and getting traveling directions while job hunting, or the



Interview respondent Claudia relates her experience as a Haitian immigrant.





Rev. Dr. Aida Irizarry-Fernandez leads women in a song of worship in front of a multicultural communion table.

bias they experienced as a result of speaking with an accent.

Another question attempted to assess the extent to which the church has helped in the adjustment/transition and what it currently does for the respondent. All respondents reported receiving assistance from the church when they were sick or in need, specifically through hospital visits and from church members who came into their homes to complete household tasks like cooking, cleaning, and shopping. Everyone received prayer support and mentioned that whenever they were absent from worship, if even for one week, they received a call from the pastor and sometimes a visit, often with other members coming along. Many respondents, especially those who

were in the U.S. alone, mentioned that the church became a substitute family for them, a sanctuary from the challenges of living in a different culture, and a place where they could make friends, enjoy fellowship, get

who was concerned about their welfare and spiritual well-being.

Another question addressed spiritual practices; the one common one was daily prayer. Every woman responded that she prayed at least

Prayer is an essential practice for these women—without it, many of them said that they would not have been able to cope with the difficulties that immigrant life presented.

helpful information, and speak their native language/dialect. One woman even met her husband at the church! Because of participating in the congregation, these women did not feel lost or alone, since there was always someone to whom they could turn

once daily; about two-thirds prayed twice a day (morning and evening) and one-third three times or more. Prayer is an essential practice for these women—without it, many of them said that they would not have been able to cope with the difficul-

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ties that immigrant life presented. Three-fifths of the women said they read scripture and many of the Haitian women read devotionals during the day, either on their way to work or on the job; they also read and/or prayed with the psalms—many of which they had committed to memory—and held Bible study at one of the members' homes. One woman said that whenever there is a challenge in her life, she consults her mother who lives in another state; her mother instructs her to pray specific psalms according to the challenge she faces. One woman mentioned fasting. The Ghanaian women also cited mid-week services, mid-morning group prayer, Bible study, and a Friday night worship service that sometimes

lasted until morning. The Haitian congregation did Bible study at one of the members' homes.

Responses to one question reflected respondents' understanding of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit, and images of God and whether these images had changed for them since they came to the U.S. God/Jesus/Holy Spirit "means everything to me," said 30 percent of respondents. Others mentioned Creator, Father, Savior, Redeemer, and Presence of God. A high number of respondents provided a mature doctrinal response to this question—God is spirit and therefore cannot be seen or touched, but is rather felt (25/30). At the same time, however, six of the twenty-five women stated that their image of

God is a grandfather-type figure with a long grey/silver beard or of Jesus as a white man with blond hair and a beard. Some respondents said that God was neither black nor white; others recalled pictures that they had seen during their childhood of Jesus knocking at the door, praying at Gethsemane, as the Good Shepherd, or in a rendition of the Last Supper. They retained these images in their minds as the way Jesus must have looked and mentioned that these were shown to them by missionaries or other foreign teachers. Several former Catholics mentioned seeing the image of the Sacred Heart when they prayed. The current church did not affect their images of God.

ANNA HOWARD SHAW CENTER WOMEN'S RETREAT

Amanda Norris

The annual Shaw Center Women's Retreat took place on February 9 in the welcoming home of Professor Kathe Pfisterer Darr. On a brisk Saturday morning, board members and students gathered for a day of "Creative Meditation and Prayer" that began with a casual breakfast followed by a relaxing and meditative period of embodied prayer lead by Holly Benzenhafer Redford. Amber Pettit and Amanda Norris then led

the refreshed and refocused company to begin meditative reflections on depictions of Biblical women in religious art. Each retreat participant was given a packet containing several images of one Biblical or apocryphal woman (for example, Eve, Lilith, Rahab, or Judith) and the passage(s) containing that woman's story; they spent time alone reflecting on the paintings before reuniting for an insightful and stimulating discussion.

After a delicious lunch provided by the Anna Howard Shaw Center board members, participants took walks, collaged, or enjoyed conversation. In the afternoon, Susan Forshey guided the group in a thought-provoking and introspective "*lectio divina* on life." The day closed with serene and moving taize worship also lead by Susan. Everyone departed Professor Darr's home at half-past three rested and rejuvenated!



FELLOWSHIP AND FARE

Sally Paddock

On Thursday afternoons at the Anna Howard Shaw Center, a smattering of people often walk past the office door, perhaps thinking about a deadline or an upcoming afternoon meeting. They quickly shift their heads to the right, eye our chattering group gathered inside, and ask, "What's going on in there?"

The AHS Center is known for many things at the School of Theology: women's advocacy and research, semester retreats, and space to enjoy a refreshing nap and a comforting cup of coffee. But on Thursday, it offers something else—encouragement, a reminder of our responsibility to others, and always—always—something fancy to eat!

The Lunch Tour 2008 did not let us down. In January, one of STH's newest faculty members, Dr. Alejandro Botta, inaugurated the semester with a light but poignant comparison of dominant women's issues in his native Argentina and those being debated on the front pages of America's newspapers. In the weeks that followed Dr. Botta's visit, those of us gathered for lunch and conversation also had the privilege of hosting Dr. Carole Bohn. We have discussed the reality of what it's like "in the field" of ministry—to be intimately involved with abortion procedures, interreligious and inter-race relationships, and the bureaucracy/confidentiality swing of military chap-

laincy. No matter how interesting the turns in our conversation—or how disturbing—the Thursday lunch hours never ceased to invite us all to step out of our routine of classes and deadlines and sit, eat, listen, and enjoy the company of others who needed the break just as much as we did.

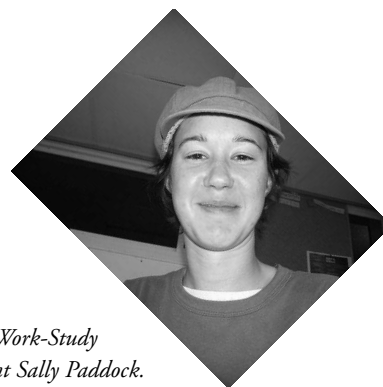
If you have never attended a Thursday lunch, we invite you to join us in the coming year. If you're early enough, there might be room to recline on a couch, but chances are you may need to snag a chair from the chapel across the hall or end up cross-legged on the floor. Either way, you will always find yourself enjoying fine food and nourished with fellowship!

WELCOME TO OUR NEW WORK-STUDY STUDENT

Sally Paddock

In January 2008, the AHS Center welcomed Sally Paddock, our newest Work-Study student. Having previously commuted to STH from Canada, she now enjoys the relative convenience of her new employment and ministry: there are only three flights of stairs involved! Afternoons,

Sally can be found at various times turtleneck-deep in preparations for Thursday's lunch; listening to the radio; or making sure everyone knows about the month's newest coffee flavor (currently: Rainforest Nut). Come by, say hi, and remind her that she needs to water the office plants!



New Work-Study student Sally Paddock.

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*Volume 24, Issue 2
Spring/Summer 2008*

MANAGING EDITOR

Choi Hee An

EDITOR

Amanda Norris

CONTRIBUTORS

Laurel Scott, Sally Paddock

PHOTOGRAPHS

Amanda Norris, Choi Hee An

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