Loving Radically

| Immigrant churches teach borderless hospitality |

The story was stunning: "About 3 p.m., in the middle of a session in North Carolina, a pastor arrived shaking and trembling. He told us what happened to his Hispanic/Latina congregation.

"Two Immigration Service vans stopped at the small store in front of his church. Without prior notice, immigration officers entered the church and arrested several undocumented people. Most people arrested were women with small children, plus a couple of pregnant women. Some were young female teenagers who had never experienced an inappropriate touch by a male. Their husbands, fathers and partners were working in the fields when the incident took place. INS officers harassed the pastor as well, but he was able to provide proof of his citizenship.

"Telling us his story, the pastor said he felt completely hopeless. He sobbed and said, 'Yesterday I had a healthy congregation of 60 people, this afternoon, everyone is gone.' He pleaded for help and justice for those families and young mothers who were about to be deported, leaving their beloved ones behind.

"Representatives of the church judicatories tried to help the pastor's congregation, but it was too late. All of those arrested were deported and several women were deported with their young ones. The pastor provided pastoral care for all those families who were forcibly separated by unjust immigration procedures and policies. It took several months for this pastor to initiate a new ministry in another location."[1]

Researching immigrant congregations

For the past three years, the Anna Howard Shaw Center at Boston University has studied immigrant churches and ministry through the experiences of immigrant women. This research project observed 10 or more immigrant congregations and completed more than 75 interviews in the contexts of separate African diasporic and Korean immigrant congregations. Research on Hispanic/Latina congregations is still under way. As we Shaw Center researchers hear stories like the story above, we are often overwhelmed by the realities of immigrant's lives and frustrated with the difficulties of immigrant ministry.

However, at the same time, we are also amazed by immigrants' faith and confessions of God's providence. We became witnesses of God's love among immigrants and within immigrant communities. Throughout this research, we have learned who we really are as the body of Christ and what we have to do as the children of God in our time.

Our first interview question was "How and when did you decide to move to the United States?" All of them, almost 99 percent of interviewees who were the first generation, answered, "For a better life." It seemed that immigration/migration was an essential quest for better lives and the immigrant church was where they started this journey. For survival and out of necessity, they became pilgrim people. Whether they chose this journey voluntarily or not, it led them to uncover the reality that they were all, regardless of their country of origin, on a pilgrimage to the City of God. St Augustine used this concept to better critique the situation of the Roman Empire—the places where it did or didn't provide a suitable landscape for Christian virtuous living. Augustine wanted to preserve the ability of the church both to cooperate with the state and to stand in contrast to it, always judging it according to the higher vision of the Kingdom of God for which we struggle and toward which we journey. Our research has shown a similar situation occurring in America for Christians today.

Understanding ourselves as sojourners in the universal quest for life opens the door for ministry that offers hospitality to the stranger who is with us on the same journey. Through an identity characterized by the idea of pilgrimage or sojourn, we are invited to share in the experience of being foreigners, of taking risks in the quest for life, of being threatened by the established powers. A church that can cultivate this identity can begin to commit to a set of practices that offer hospitality from its core and not just as an add-on ministry.

Our research has shown that American Christians are being confronted with having to decide whether or not to share in Christ's Galilean identity, a trait that kept him off-center and not a part of the powers. This move

may sometimes mean persecution and becoming outsiders. We may even consider to what extent our churches can engage in the radical hospitality of the Sanctuary movement of the 1980s where a number of churches and pastors risked legal persecution in order to welcome "the least of these."

The identity of Christians as sojourners allows us to stand against the powers of oppression and persecution, for whom the humanity of some is measured strictly by their legal status as citizens, by their dominant language, their education, or their ability to pay taxes to the state. This position allows us a critical perspective on the ways in which we participate in or actively resist the dehumanization of the stranger, for we too are "strangers in a strange land." Once we identify ourselves as strangers, strangers are no longer "others". We see that they become a part of our lives. We realize they are a part of us and we are a part of them. This identity formation allows us to open our eyes to see who we are. It requires all churches to participate in the exercise of being the body of Christ—not just those parishes with an active ministry to immigrants or with high populations of immigrants. With this understanding, demographics do not matter, since the main objective is to claim our citizenship in the Kin-dom of God and act accordingly, welcoming all into the many rooms of our God's house.

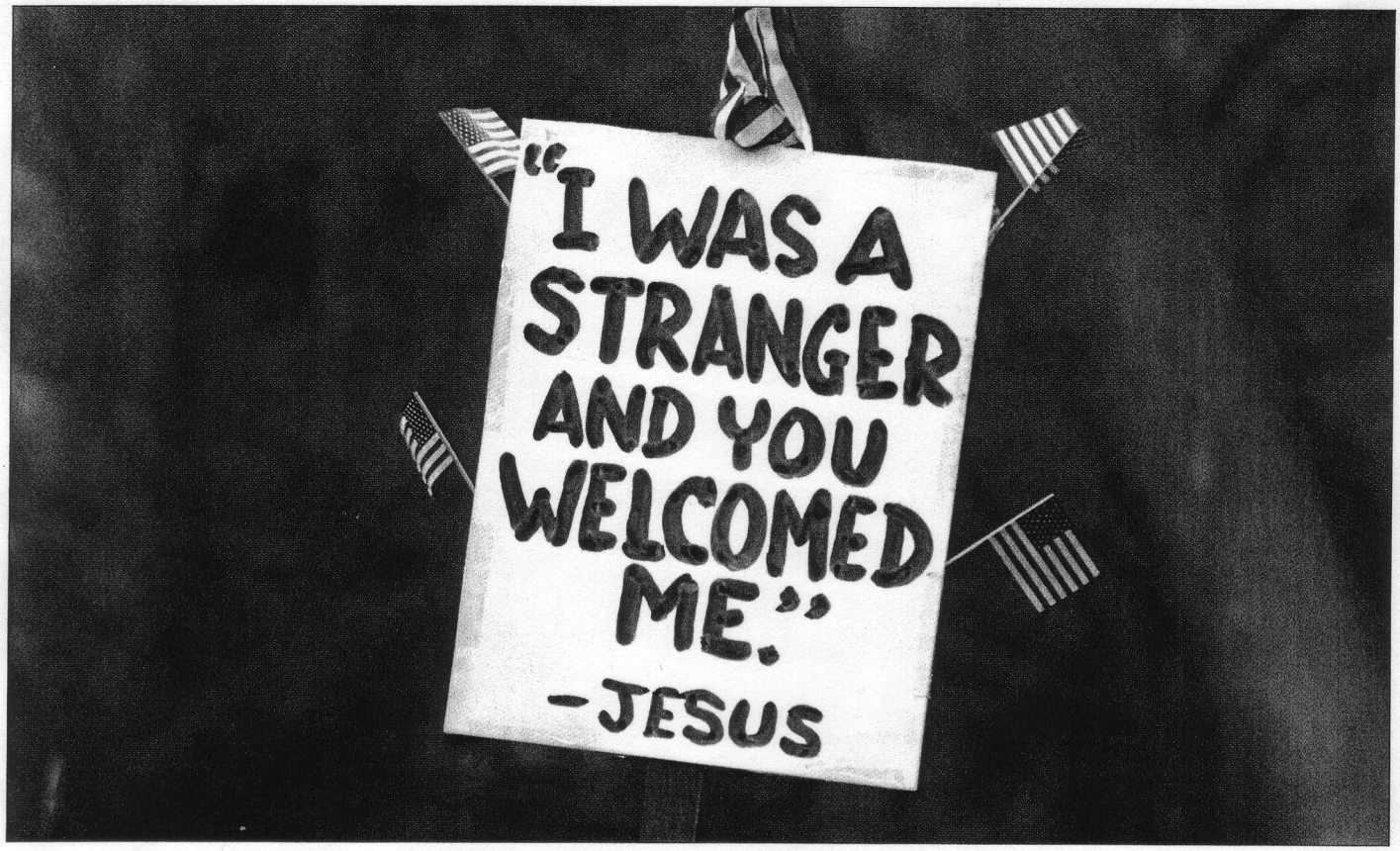
Being an immigrant means going through a transitional time without certainty of settlement. This experience is like a "forever transitioning" from the familiar to the unfamiliar, from the known to the unknown. It is occupying a space between two cultures with the constant challenge of negotiating between the two. In this space as immigrants, people are not quite Latino/a, Korean, or African/Haitian, but not quite American either. Many immigrants go to their ethnic churches when they come to the United States. From our research, we want to show how different immigrant churches respond to this forever-transitioning time and and lift up their ministry out of love and faith.

Home between two cultures

Korean immigrants often feel the separation from their motherland as they plunge into the challenges of a new land. On arrival in America, they tend to go to their ethnic churches first. In some cases, before they come to this country, they have decided which ethnic church they will attend. This phenomenon is often criticized as segregation or anxious attachment to Korea, even though they need to find and create their mother Korea here in order to adjust and optimally function. This criticism is based on dominant assumptions such as the "melting pot theory": If you are in America, you should mingle with and become (white) American. Using this theory, the phenomenon of ethnic churches is seen as regression in terms of the American acculturation process. People who go to ethnic churches are treated as people who can not adjust or are unable to join American society. They are seen as failures in the eyes of white America.

However, this "melting pot" interpretation is the exact opposite of why Korean immigrants go to their ethnic church. They participate in the Korean/Korean American church in order to adjust to American society. Through and in the church, they work to overcome their fear in a strange land and to survive in white America. Between the white and Korean cultures and societies, the Korean immigrant church is where they can create a home in the U.S., away from their motherland. Something familiar needs to be found in order to feel safe, secure, and comfortable as they venture into a new reality.

One of the interviewees said that the immigrant experience is like "putting someone else's clothes on." She tried to attend a church with a predominantly white congregation, as she wanted to learn American culture. However, no one fully engaged her in conversation



during the coffee hour, and she felt very uncomfortable. She is now attending the Korean ethnic church, and she feels more at home, just like "putting her own clothes on." The Korean ethnic churches provide an environment in which Korean immigrants continue to use familiar Korean liturgies, hymns and styles of worship that make them feel embraced in their time between two cultures. At the same time, these churches provide a place for them to hold and develop two different but simultaneous and necessary identities that they now need. These churches are not just a transitional space, but a home for their "forever transitioning" lives.

Surrogate family

In the case of the African diaspora immigrant church, our study also found another concept of immigrant church. When African immigrants, and those from countries where African slaves were brought (like the Caribbean islands), make a transition to this country, they often seek a church that will serve as their family. Finding "family" is an absolute need. Over time, the majority of women who were the first of their family to come to America have come to regard the congregation where they had found a "church home" as a surrogate family.

What made this concept so compelling was that it emerged from the research question, "Why did you stay with this congregation?" It yielded answers like: "because it's like a family," or, "I find friends here" or "They help you when you have problems."

The women told stories about the church's crucial role in their lives. Said one: "When I had my baby, the Women's Fellowship group took turns coming to the house to take care of me and the baby. For two months I did not have to worry about cooking or shopping or making it to doctor's appointments because the women at the church took care of those things. It was just me and my husband at home so I was grateful." Another woman said: "When you are sick, or something happens to you, they call and come to the house and pray with you...not just the pastor, but members of the church, especially the women." Still another woman told of an instance where she received financial help from the congregation for a debt that she owed.

Also in these congregations, when a member experiences the death of an immediate family member in their homeland, church members who are able to assist financially help the grieving member return home to attend to funeral duties. In African and African extracted cultures, these are significant rites of passage. Likewise, announcements during the worship service include specific references both to the availability of, and

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the need for housing, and other types of basic needs. These congregations help their members in very personal ways. Thus the congregation becomes for the member a surrogate family, attending to personal needs and providing comfort, support and guidance.

Being a surrogate family is not easy. The immigrant ministry requires a lot of effort and energy. It usually involves extra care and support on many occasions. Many are exhausted in this journey, but because they are a family, they cannot give up on each other. From our research, we find that the immigrant church has sustained and continued to respond to this need out of faith and love of God's family.

Our vision, our ministry

Regardless of ethnic differences, many immigrant churches provide common programs such as soup kitchens, food pantries, English-as-a-Second-Language classes for the first generation, ethnic cultural class for the second generation, assistance in filing taxes, accessing necessary public services, job training, and hospice care. These churches try to be a family, friend, and home for immigrant peoples who are children of God no matter what their documentation status. Ethnic and immigrant churches learn to provide a place where people can be respected as citizens of the City of God in the eyes of God, if not in the eyes of American society.

From this research, despite our different immigrant contexts, we have recognized one significant ministry need that all churches across America must begin to practice: radical, prophetic, intentional hospitality.

Hospitality has been an integral spiritual discipline since Christianity's inception, from the Gospel of Matthew through Acts and the epistles. The practice has been encouraged and exercised in church contexts for the last 2,000 years.

The basic concept of hospitality is about welcoming the strangers, the "others". However, the concept of hospitality in immigrant multicultural contexts is different. It is not about "them." It is not about welcoming strangers or "others." Instead, Christian hospitality today requires a radical paradigm shift because it is about "us", including ourselves with the "others". It is discovering who we are to be as followers of Jesus Christ in a society based on concepts of empire.

UMNS PHOTO BY COREY DANIEL GODBEY. GOODWIN

Members of Methodists Associated Representing the Cause of Hispanic Americans hold hands in prayer following a communications training session in Newark, N.J. The meeting focused on comprehensive immigration reform and a commitment to Hispanic ministries in the United States and abroad.

In terms of immigrant ministry, hospitality is not simply meeting the needs of immigrants nor a strategy for growing church memberships. Hospitality is not just recognizing ethnic enclaves. This hospitality is an intentional Christian discipline that requires compassion and love, a willingness to walk extra miles with all and each of us together. It is a prophetic biblical value that commands us to challenge the powers that be to enact true justice and righteousness in the eyes of God.

The Anna Howard Shaw Center's study of immigrant women and their churches is teaching us that Christian hospitality today must be a radical act that moves beyond regional and national borders and sovereignties. Hospitality today is the Christian mandated exercise to be a part of the body of Christ. Learning hospitality in immigrant contexts is the recognition of who we really are. It is a process of how we become. The vision of our future ministry starts here. "We as church" need to be part of this becoming and learn to be part of God's Kin-dom.

Lastly, we sincerely thank the churches that participate in our research and teach us to learn how to do God's ministry together. Without their teaching and participation, we cannot open our eyes to love ourselves as well as others. We deeply appreciate their warm support and tremendous effort for this project. TPC

The Rev. Aida Irizarry-Fernandez, the Rev. Laurel E. Scott, Dr. M.T. Davila and the Rev. Yoo-Yun Cho-Chang contributed to this article.

1 This story was told by Rev. Aida Irizarry-Fernandez in the Anna Howard Shaw Center Annual Conference, "Immigrant Women: Singing God's Song in a New Choir" on April 10, 2008