Imagine With Me: North American Pacific/Asian Disciples
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Transcript

Terri Hord Owens: Welcome to another edition of Imagine With Me, a time when I get to talk with congregational and church leaders across our whole church to learn more about what they're doing to reimagine how they must be as church, how we all must be as church in this new world in which we find ourselves. So today I'm so excited to be talking with the Reverend Chung Seong Kim, who is the executive pastor of the North American Pacific/Asian Disciples within our church.

Welcome, Chung Seong. It's so good to have you here with me and I just want to give you a few minutes to introduce yourself and talk a little bit about, for those who - I can't believe there are people who don't know who NAPAD is - but herelet's hear a little bit about your ministry and what's exciting to you about NAPAD right now.

Chung Seong Kim: Hello, my name is Chung Seong Kim. I am the executive pastor of the NAPAD. NAPAD has a long name - North American Pacific/Asian Disciples. The reason why I have a long name is that we have a long list of the ethnic and cultural group amongst ourselves. We have 18 different ethnic and linguistic groups among ourselves and around the 130 churches among ourselves. And that is our culture - that is expressed in many ways.

And NAPAD is one of the fastest growing parts of our church. And then the last few years we have exciting new church planting, even somewhere we never planted the church like Bismarck, North Dakota. We didn't have any Disciple church there, but two years ago we planted one Chuukese church that's the first Disciple congregation over there.

And we have many things going on in NAPAD, but the most exciting things, I think, in our ministry is the diversity, the inclusiveness. We always talk about inclusiveness, how diverse our culture is, and Disciples is famous to be inclusive. And then that's our model.

But I always said that we are not only talking about NAPAD living in it right now. That is something that I want to share, so if you want to know more about NAPAD go to napad.net and then we have a Facebook and then if you go to our website you can register as a member of our Constant Contact list.

THO: That's great, Chung Seong. Would you say - and this excites me every time I hear those numbers - 18 different languages - there's now a Chuukese Disciples congregation in Bismarck, North Dakota. There are actually some places
where Disciples are not, and because of that church, as you said, the first Disciples congregation in North Dakota.

What can the whole church learn from NAPAD about embracing such broad diversity? This is not Black or white; this is diversity even within the North American Asian and Pacific Islander communities. So what would you say have been the the keys to ensuring that people feel included and that NAPAD can feel like this wholesome, inclusive community?

CSK: Yeah, I think the 18 different languages kind of represent what is going on in the NAPAD community. I don't say that we are all in peace and everything is even in our community. There's some cultural difference and then the historical backgrounds are different, so when I approach each of our ethnic churches, I am very humble and respectful to their culture. Some cultures we are stepping on new ground, so when you do that, you have to have a respect first. That is the starting point.

So even though we have a different historical backgrounds, we even have some historical conflict. For example, between Korean and Japanese; between Vietnamese and the Burmese, there's a war going on, but even though we have that kind of conflict, we believe that we are in the Table of Lord. And then, as a Christian that is the first approach.

And in the same time we respect the culture we say, "We don't know about you, so we want to learn about that," is the basic attitude we have to have. It is a kind of curious that how we can communicate, of course, we can communicate in English with the accent. So a language is a tool to communicate, so we use the English as a tool for communication but in our worship and in other activities, we use our language. That is a reaching culture, that kind of spiritually touches our hearts. So when I have a chance to pray, I always, if there's an option, I can pray in Korean not because I don't want to pray in English - I can pray in English - but it does not touch as much as when I pray in Korean. So respect for the other culture.

And then, say when you don't know, "I don't know. I want to learn more." That is the core value that makes the NAPAD community really culturally diverse and have a very harmonious relationship. That is so important - respecting one another, having humility, right, to say, "I don't know. I need to know." And also by assuming that your own culture is superior in any way.

THO: I think that's one thing that all of us who are not part of the majority culture in the United States - we certainly don't want to do those things within our own communities that have been done against us, so respect and humility to say we don't know, we need to know. And that we are all welcome at the Table of the Lord. Those are such important values that I think the whole church needs to live out.
During this time of pandemic, as we know, there's been an incredible rise, more publicly, a rise in anti-Asian hate and anti-Asian violence. People literally being attacked in the streets. We know of recent bombings and shootings. The shootings in the spas a couple of months ago and we also know that discrimination against Asian and Pacific Islander communities is not new. How has NAPAD responded in - and I know we issued a statement, you and Yvonne Gilmore from the National Convocation, Lori Tapia from Obra Hispana - we issued a statement in support, but you know I'm a firm believer we have to do more than statements, thoughts, and prayers. What's been the impact within NAPAD, and what would you say to the church about what we need to do in response to ongoing hate and racism against Asian and Pacific Islanders?

CSK: Yeah, it's been actually, historically, it has been there for a long time, but because of our culture, many of them - not all, but many of them - the humbleness, humility is - we have a little word in Korean or Chinese that the silence is gold and to speak out is silver so we sometimes take a silence, be humble, like a sign of humility. But in the case of the racial violence, we have been in that stage for a long time. So in recent report there's a 1800 percent increase our violence against Asian and Pacific Islanders during the pandemic. But I believe there is more than that because many of the Asian Americans, they didn't report. Actually you know some of the studies said only 25 percent of the incidences are reported. Some said it's less than 20 percent. So that is happening in our society, especially after the pandemic.

Our political leader used the Asian community as a scapegoat, so that is the one thing, but not only the pandemic period but in our history. We have a long history of discriminating against the Asian community. We have all the 19th century, we have a Chinese Exclusion Act that is basically blocking all the immigration relating to the Chinese or Asians. And then, you know, in World War II, a Japanese American internment kept in an internment camp. So only in 1960, after the new immigration law is established, the new influx of the immigration is there.

So because of this anti-Asian sentiment, not only as the Disciple, but we have ecumenical community, Asian American community, working together advocating. Asian American immigrant community, also we provide some education and legal tools and even we have some funds.

For example, last month there is a shooting at Atlanta spa. There is some massage worker in spa that was killed. The six of them killed and that involved anti-Asian sentiment. Also there is involved in the discrimination against a woman, a working woman, so we are working with the Methodist churches and Presbyterian church and then we raised some funds for advocating.

The second generation Asian Americans deeply involved and they raised $6.5 million in weeks, mainly from second generation networks. I think that is exciting. And even though the first generation take silence as a goal, but second generation is different. They speak out. They're advocating. I like it. So you know community is changing.
So the best thing as a Christian, as a Disciple, we can do is just approach the local community. If there is a Asian church, the Korean church, Japanese church, any church, we can have a relationship with them, maybe exchange some pulpit and then know their culture by doing that. Asian community feels like we are part of the bigger community and other general community know that Asian communities are not isolated or the mission field. Our brother and sister among us, also, we recognize that, and I think it will be better as a society, as a whole.

The reason why Asian American is targeted in this pandemic is still we don't see the Asian community as American. We are American here. We're a citizen here, but we are regarded as a foreigner in our own land. In some way, many of them, half of them are born here. My daughter was born here as an American citizen, but still people ask me, "Oh where are you from?" Whenever I go any place, the first question they ask is, "Where are you from," so I intentionally said, "I am from Atlanta," and then I ask, you may ask again and then I say I'm from the South Korea, right? That is the little sign that still Asian American is regarded as a foreigner in our own land.

THO: Yeah, I think that's so important, as an African-American woman, I think, you know, I get asked a lot just because of my skin color, "Well, what are you?" Like, you know, "where are your people from, you can't be, you know, really Black" or those kinds of questions that say that I'm some part other than whatever someone has decided the norm is. And that's what you're saying, that there's still a norm in this country as to what an American should look like, even what a Black person or even what an Asian person should look like.

And we can no longer be treated as objects of mission. That's another important point - that we are not the mission field. We are brothers and sisters and siblings together. The Asian community is not a mission field. We are brothers and sisters together.

I know that one of the exciting things that's been happening within the NAPAD community has been so many new churches. Such a large part of our growth over the past 20 years in new congregations has come through the NAPAD community. What do you see as - What is it about Disciples? I know that there have actually been some communities that were already established congregations and made the decision to become Disciples. So, in the NAPAD community, what's that planting process look like, and what do you see as being the positive attraction for a Chuukese or other community that wants to become part of the Disciples family?

CSK: I think I can say something personal because I was a Presbyterian and I was born as a Presbyterian. My father was a Presbyterian pastor in Korea, but I moved here. I was in member of the PC-USA and in one point I get to know the Disciples. And then Disciples value of inclusiveness - that's a very, really important thing regardless of our background. I feel like I can be a Korean Presbyterian, have a Korean Presbyterian heritage, and then come to Disciples and then I can function as a faithful
Disciple in this community. That is my assumption. That's why I joined. And many of our Disciples, our NAPAD new churches, I think they have a same understanding.

That's why for example, the Chuukese community is the fastest growing part of the NAPAD community, because the last few years we have more than 10 churches joined or planted. The reason is they have a Methodist background and then some of the Baptist missionaries were there. But the reason why they come to the Disciples at first is, in St. Joseph in Missouri area, - they were actually on their island they were a member of the United Church of Christ - and then they came to and then have a place, looking for place for the worship and then happen to be they contacted with the Disciple congregation. And then they are open arms and then they accept that and then they see that as not only providing them place of worship, they regarded that as opening their home. So many after that incident happened, we have a Chuukese rally every Easter. And then some with the big rally, everybody from the United States came to the one place and the worship together.

And then they introduced what happened in St. Joseph and many of them begin to contact the NAPAD office and New Church Ministry. That's how it started. And then they get to know about the Disciples. And then right now, as you said, it's the fastest growing ethnic group right now.

So the small act of kindness, not only that is just only expressed as the kindness, but that is understood as a core of a Christian value. Many times we say about the covenant, only covenant for the denomination or something, but we have to remember that we have a covenant as a Christian and we have a covenant as a brother and sister in Christ. That's the first thing. People feel that and when they find that important aspect in our in our church, people will come. That's why I came. That's why the church came. That's why many new churches choose intentionally, not they are born as a Disciple, but intentionally choose Disciple as their home. So I think that that is an important part.

THO: Thank you for that, Chung. That is an important reminder that we all, as brothers and sisters, siblings in Christ, are there because of this new covenant, that Jesus reminded us of the blood of his covenant. I always say a new covenant between God and God's creation, so we're bound first there at the Table, and then in whatever part of the body we are fellowshipping in, there that covenant extends there as well.

It's been so great to talk to you and to hear not only about the exciting new growth, but also to hear from your experience what life of the Asian community is really adding to our whole church. Our wider church is all of us, so whenever two or three of us are gathered, I always say the whole church is there.

Church, Disciples, you can be a part of this movement for wholeness in a fragmented world, part of which is planting new churches and part of which is ensuring that the kind of ministry and radical welcome that Pastor Chung Seong has spoken of can continue wherever we find one another. We must. Always that act of kindness and welcome is
part of what the New Church Ministry is about. The Pentecost offering is being taken over the next couple of Sundays in our congregations. And it's through the work of New Church Ministry that some of our Chuukese congregations, Spanish-speaking speaking congregations, congregations all over the church, are getting their start.

Let's be the new church and let's be the church that we say we are. Once again, thank you so much, Pastor Kim for joining me today. And Disciples, remember that God loves you, and so do I. We'll see you next time on another edition of Imagine With Me. God bless.