



Toward a More Colorful

BY IRENE PAK

I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert.

Isaiah 43:19

Presbyterians often talk about following one's call and pursuing vocation as something that can be achieved through the process of discernment within one's faith and community. We often presuppose that people have a range of choices available to them and that they can decide what they want to do for a career. The ability to survive is assumed. In examining the issue of vocation in racial ethnic congregations or for racial ethnic persons, one finds there can be obstacles in place that prevent some persons from living out their call. Is it a privilege that one can even think about following one's calling?

As one example, for many immigrants and refugees in the United States (documented and non-documented), survival and choice cannot be assumed. For the many immigrants who come to the United States to toil in our fields as migrant workers, or the millions whose only career choice is between being janitors, housekeepers or gardeners, the question of vocation, as we pose it, is irrelevant. In performing these humble jobs, they are not necessarily following God's call on their lives. They may be meeting some of the world's greatest needs, but they

are not finding their hearts' deep gladness as they perform these tasks. Most immigrants and all refugees are driven out of their home countries by difficult circumstances. When they arrive in the United States, their struggle to survive does not end. Their new context does not sufficiently value their qualifications, relegating them to lower strata of society and forcing them to give up the quest for vocation, and accept arduous jobs.

What, then, is the role of the Church in helping these people find meaning in these circumstances? How can we re-think vocation for this context?

In his article, "Calling and Choice: A Theology of Vocation" (see p. 7), Jack Stotts presents the call of vocation as a "response to a power outside oneself that is attractive and compelling." He states that a person responds to the call and is affirmed by the church. These same individuals expect the church to be held accountable in empowering them as they seek to live out their call. However, inequities in the church negate the very nature of the call system. Stotts presents a vocational paradigm to an audience that lives and works in a context of privilege—people who are able to respond fully to God's call at will. Still, many people of color, and perhaps especially women of color, continue to encounter systemic barriers when they seek to serve God as pastors and church leaders.

Statistics clearly show the imbalance between the majority group and racial ethnic constituencies in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), and between men and women in ministry in racial ethnic constituencies.

- ✓ Of active clergy, 87 percent are white and 13 percent are racial ethnic men and women.
- ✓ Of 400 Hispanic/Latino/Latina pastors, 337 are men; 63 are women.
- ✓ Of 39 Native American pastors, 30 are men; nine are women.
- ✓ Of 700 Korean pastors, about 40 are women.
- ✓ Of 472 African American pastors, about 113 are women.
- ✓ Of 52 new immigrant pastors (Africans, South Asians, Portuguese and French Caribbean), two are women.
- ✓ Of 150 Asian pastors, 14 are women.
- ✓ Of 33 Middle Eastern pastors, three are women.

How, then, can we re-think vocation for this context?

First, we must recognize that the very nature of the call system within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) makes it difficult for persons of color and immigrants to pursue calls into ordained ministry. Higher education is not easily accessible to many. If we indeed affirm that a people is called prior to the individual, we must be prepared to help discern and respond as we call forth leaders and affirm gifts in one another.



Vision of Vocation

We must also recognize that call and vocation are impacted by systemic prejudice and racial discrimination that still pumps through the veins of our daily living. All church communities can be locations for grounding people in their cultural identity and providing tools to deal with racism in society and within their own walls. Congregations can embrace and integrate their members' and leaders' cultural and ethnic heritages into the life of the faith community. To draw into the larger church gifted potential leaders for whom vocational choice may not appear to be an option, we must recognize that stereotyping and internalized racism shape our perception of people's possibilities and how we might nurture possibilities in others.

Strategizing for Change

In the 208th General Assembly (1996), the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) acknowledged the need for an intentional churchwide strategy for racial ethnic church growth. The recognition that PC(USA) racial ethnic membership was only 4.7 percent at the time, whereas racial ethnic persons account for more than 25 percent of the U.S. population, spurred the push for growth. With this new awareness, the Racial Ethnic and Immigrant Evangelism Church Growth Strategy was developed. The seven General Assembly racial ethnic congregational enhancement offices in Louisville described below are implementing this strategy together.

New Immigrant Groups Ministries in the U.S.A.

Assisting middle governing bodies and congregations to reach out and welcome new immigrants into the life of the denomination is the task of the office of New Immigrant Group Ministries. Staffed by **Angel Suarez-Valera**, this office currently works with groups from Africa, South Asia (India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), the country of Brazil, and the regions of the English and French Caribbean. Assisting new immigrant groups to cope with social issues such as immigration, racism and segregation, and human rights in education, health and employment is also an integral part of the mission.

Black Congregational Enhancement

Staffed by **A. Vanessa Hawkins**, the Office of Black Congregational Enhancement provides leadership at all levels of the denomination to strengthen the nurture and witness of Black congregations so that they may grow in health, vitality and ministry within their communities and the larger church. The Black Presbyterian legacy of prophetic leaders for justice and a culturally plural society has been transformational for the church and the world. Black Presbyterian congregations proclaim the gospel from an Afro-centric, Christian spirituality that liberates people to be disciples of Jesus Christ.

Hispanic/Latino/Latina Congregational Enhancement

The Office of Hispanic/Latino/Latina Congregational Enhancement serves people from South and Central America, the Caribbean, Mexico, Spain and other Latin-influenced cultures. These combine to make up the largest racial ethnic group in the United States and the third largest in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Church growth, transformation ministries, leadership development, new church development, racial justice and support of the National Hispanic/Latino/Latina caucus are among its mission goals. Staffed by **Hector Rodriguez**, the office identifies and articulates a unique cultural heritage and recommends ways the ministry of the Reformed churches can benefit from it, to the glory of God.

Native American Congregational Enhancement

Although indigenous to the United States, Native Americans represent the smallest racial ethnic group recognized by the church. There are 562 federally-recognized tribes scattered from coast to coast, many with a long history of Presbyterianism. Staffed by **Sallie Cuaresma**, the Office of Native American Congregational Enhancement provides a bridge of information for both Native and non-Native Americans, and support for Native churches within the PC(USA). Congregations

on reservations in rural areas are dependent on lay leaders, because finding support for ordained clergy in those areas is a challenge.

Asian Congregational Enhancement

Staffed by **Shun Chi Wang**, the Office of Asian Congregational Enhancement works with more than 10 different Asian councils. The term *Asian* is a racial and ethnic designation that covers more than 30 diverse groups in the United States, each with its own tradition, history, language and culture. The term *Asian American* does not imply that all are the same. The office assists with issues related to Asian American ministries, develops resources for leadership development, helps with new church development projects, consults on issues of church redevelopment and facilitates leadership training conferences.

Middle Eastern Ministries

Staffed by **Amgad Beblawi**, the Office of Middle Eastern Ministries provides spiritual and organizational services that enable the growth and enhance the ministry of Middle Eastern Presbyterian congregations and fellowships in the United States. Today, there are more than 60 Middle Eastern Presbyterian congregations and fellowships throughout the country; members worship in Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian and Farsi. This, indeed, is a reflection of the work of the Holy Spirit and a testament to the enduring witness of Middle Eastern Christians in the Diaspora.

Korean Congregational Enhancement

Korean American congregations are a vital, visible and growing part of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). They are the second-largest racial ethnic constituency group after Black congregations. In 1970 there were about 20 Korean Presbyterian congregations;

Nine Things We Can Do, Starting Now

1. We can rethink Christian vocation for racial ethnic congregations and individuals by noticing who is missing from leadership at assemblies, presbytery meetings, PW gatherings and circles.
2. We can implement the PC(USA) Racial Ethnic and Immigrant Church Growth Strategy within our communities. (Read it at www.pcusa.org/immigrant/pdf/growth-strategy.pdf)
3. We can form alliances and partnerships with the General Assembly Council's racial ethnic ministries and advocacy groups on matters of racism, segregation, violence and sexism.
4. We can continue to support the recommendations from the Women of Color Consultation. (Read the recommendations at www.pcusa.org/womensministries/resources/woc-recommendations.pdf.)
5. We can connect racial ethnic young women in our communities with the Racial Ethnic Young Women Together (REYWT) program: www.pcusa.org/reywt.
6. We can utilize tools and resources from the Office of Racial Justice and Advocacy for antiracism training. Visit www.pcusa.org/racialjustice for information.
7. We can keep racial ethnic churches accountable so that practices that are sexist or disempowering for women pursuing vocation do not continue.
8. We can provide financial support for racial ethnic seminarians, particularly for women students.
9. We can provide advocacy support through the seven congregational enhancement offices and the office of racial justice and advocacy and utilize their support for implementing change. These offices exist to help you, so don't hesitate to contact them at 888/728-7228, or www.pcusa.org/raciaethnic.

in 2005 there were 400 congregations, with a combined total of 50,000 members. Staffed by **Sun Bai Kim**, the Office of Korean Congregational Enhancement is fully committed to the mission of the church without losing members' Korean ethnic identity and faith experiences.

Toward a More Colorful Vision

Knowing that support and resource groups such as these are in place within the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) is a first step toward nurturing Christ's call to different constituencies within our congregations and presbyteries.

Whether as an ordained leader or as a layperson, each of us can take

additional steps to build a more racially-inclusive church. Together, we can create a true context of empowerment for all who hold a God-given passion for ministry. Let us accept the challenge to do justice, so that all of God's people may live into full humanity as we continue to discern God's call for our beloved church. 🍏

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