

Servant Leadership as a Model for Unifying First and Second Generation Chinese American Churches

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This paper focuses on the leadership theories present in first and second generation Chinese American protestant churches with an emphasis on the need for a unifying leadership approach. The first generation church is identified as all congregants of Chinese decent who have immigrated to the United States. The second generation church is identified as all congregants of Chinese decent who were born in the United States. Though similar characteristics are present in both church groups, the member needs take on different forms within each group. The studies conducted by Yang, Palinkas, Alumkal and Jeung are used to illustrate the different needs of each group while presenting a basis for the need for the application of Greenleaf's servant leadership within both first and second generation churches.

With the number of immigrant and multicultural protestant churches in the United States, particular attention should be given to the leadership theories in practice in Chinese American churches. Some studies have examined the generational differences between first and second generation Chinese American church-goers but have only made brief references to the leadership styles present in both church groups. In Yang's (1999) study of the Chinese Christian Church of Greater Washington D.C., he noted the uniquely different needs of the first and second generation congregants. Through his examination of the language and cultural differences between both Chinese church groups, Yang established a platform that allowed for later research. According to Yang, "the differences between the Chinese service and the English service reflect the different needs of the immigrants and their American-educated children growing up in a church" (p. 60). Language and cultural variables seem to unite first generation Chinese Immigrants while isolating the second generation Chinese American, thus establishing the need for a unifying leadership approach. This

paper will focus on the leadership theories in practice in both first generation and second generation Chinese American churches while identifying the need for servant leadership within both groups.

In Lawrence Palinkas' (1989) study of two Chinese American protestant churches in California, leadership need specific to first generation Chinese churches was recognized. Palinkas noted that some church leaders may have established and maintained their leadership roles by articulating information that would help the first generation Chinese church members successfully adapt to their new surroundings in the United States. Of this first generation, Yang (1999) wrote, "they want the preacher to suggest the wisdom of life, ease their anxieties, comfort their hearts and assure their identity in American society" (p. 59). Both Palinkas and Yang recognized the existence of common characteristics among different first generation Chinese American Church groups. The first generation Chinese church members seemed to desire direction. They wanted guidance and wanted to know exactly what they were expected to do. They may have even been afraid of the consequences of making certain decisions. Based on these findings, transactional leadership seems to be the primary leadership theory demonstrated by the leaders in first generation church groups.

Bass and Steidlmeier (1999) described the role transactional leadership plays in the relationship between leaders and followers. They presented transactional leaders as those who motivate their followers by providing some rewards and by offering correction. The transactional leader participates in an exchange with the followers and sets a precedent for future interactions. As Palinkas' study suggested, in first generation churches, the church leaders may keep their positions in exchange for bestowing positive, encourage words upon their congregations. The congregation would in turn, keep leaders who can identify with their situations and convey necessary information. By providing for the emotional needs of the church body, the transactional leader can establish a position of power in the first generation church. This power is exacerbated by the leader's ability to communicate clear standards and responsibilities to the congregation. The followers know what they are expected to do and are thus able to keep the status quo. Despite the apparent usefulness of transactional leadership, this leadership approach may in fact be less helpful to the first generation congregation. Transactional leadership does not focus on individual growth and is less concerned with the development of members within the organization (Northouse, 2007).

To truly serve the first generation church, church leaders need to go beyond simply providing for arbitrary surface needs and instead provide an environment where followers can develop a clear direction for the future of their organization (Greenleaf, 1996). In this case, servant leadership may be more useful than transactional leadership. A servant leader is a servant first and is committed to serving his or her followers so that they will be able to grow within their organization (Greenleaf, 1977). The goal of a servant leader should not only be to serve but also to encourage the development of servant leadership qualities in their followers thus allowing their followers to serve both within and outside of the organization (Yukl, 2006). In the first generation church, this means that the servant leader must go beyond providing encouraging words and offer an atmosphere that encourages the church members to grow as individuals.

Though some first generation congregations may be encouraged to grow and adapt to their new lives in the US, they are also allowed to be insulated from their new culture. In his study of Asian American churches in the San Francisco bay area, Jeung (2005) described Asian Ethnic Churches' long history as safe havens where ethnic identity and unity could be secured. Chinese church leaders must encourage their followers to change and provide them with the resources necessary for assimilation into their new culture. Empowering the first generation church members brings them to a place where they are able to change (Russell & Stone, 2002). This change must be initiated in an ethical manner. As Greenleaf (1977) wrote, "leadership by persuasion has the virtue of change by conviction rather than coercion" (p. 30). With transactional leaders, there may be a chance that coercion is used by appeasing and patronizing the congregation rather than truly empowering the church members to change. In contrast, the servant leader would serve the first generation church by providing a safe haven while also empowering and encouraging his or her followers to change.

The leadership challenges facing second generation Chinese American church congregations represent needs that are somewhat different from their first-generation counterparts. In his study of the religious beliefs and practices of second generation Chinese Americans, Alumkal, (2003) wrote, "their experience is not one of social change, of making the transition from one cultural system to another, but of integrating cultural systems that have been simultaneously present throughout their lives" (p. 35). Alumkal's observations suggest that although the first and second generation share a racial identity, their similarities may only be skin deep. Jeung (2005) recognized similar attitudes in his study of the second generation congregants attending Chinese Grace Church in San Francisco. Jeung noted that the second generation seemed disinterested in the formal first generation sermon structure. The second generation church embraces a culture that may seem more foreign to their parents. Growing up in an American culture obsessed with role models and celebrity emulation, the second generation Chinese American looks to leaders who will lead by example (Jeung, 2005).

Transformational leadership creates an environment that provides role models for the second generation and that encourages some individual growth among church members. According to Yukl (2006) "With transformational leadership, the followers feel trust, admiration, loyalty, and respect toward the leader, and they are motivated to do more than they originally expected to do" (p. 262). The second generation church group has had to do more and go farther. They are expected to excel in an American culture that they have always know while embracing a Chinese culture that is slowly becoming more foreign to them (Jeung, 2005). The transformational church leader, through serving as a role model, becomes the example to follow and an advocate for organizational change. According to Northouse, (2007) "the transformational perspective describes how the leader is out front advocating change for others, and this concept is consistent with society's popular notion of what leadership means" (p. 191). transformational leadership in the second generation Chinese American churches may have successfully spurred both individual and church growth. Jeung's (2005) research has presented evidence as to the effectiveness of transformational leadership in initiating growth in Asian

American churches in the San Francisco bay area. This growth usually involved efforts to move away from an identity as an immigrant church and required a panasian or multiethnic approach that sought to serve the individual. Of churches implementing these approaches, Jeung (2005) wrote, “rather than preserving ethnic ties or building transnational connections, these churches have established a new solidarity at the intersection of race and religion” (p. 43).

The church leaders who have created a vision for the future of the Chinese American church while still meeting the needs of individual members are perhaps, better described as servant leaders rather than transformational leaders. Servant leadership places great emphases on the need for equality (Russell & Stone, 2002). This is a characteristic that is present in the leadership styles used in panasian and multiethnic churches. In the second generation church, servant leadership would also be needed to ensure that individual needs are given priority over the needs of leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). By putting these needs before their own, second generation Chinese church leaders can use the model of servant leadership to establish an attitude of service and to better understand the needs of their congregations. Patterson (2003) described servant leaders as “those leaders who lead an organization by focusing on their followers, such that the followers are the primary concern and the organizational concerns are peripheral” (p. 5). Winston (2003) built upon Patterson’s view of servant leadership and succeeded in emphasizing the leadership role as being a cyclical process. This process of serving and being served may better enable the second generation church members to help meet the needs of the first generation members thus establishing a unifying approach toward church leadership.

Though the generational needs of those who attend first and second generation Chinese American churches may, at times, lead to diverse leadership approaches, both church groups represent organizational environments that necessitate servant leadership. Both first and second generation Chinese churches provide environments where leaders have opportunities to exercise servant leadership and through doing so, provide for the individual needs of each congregant. As Yukl (2006) wrote “servant leaders must listen to followers, learn about their needs and aspirations, and be willing to share in their pain and frustration” (p. 420). This approach will serve both church groups and provide a unifying leadership style. As churches grow to accommodate the changing needs of their congregations, the servant leader will need to listen to the needs of his or her followers and move the congregation forward. The successful church leader needs to help the first generation Chinese congregation further assimilate into their new American culture while still addressing the needs of the second and later generations of Chinese American church members. The question as to whether first and second generation Chinese American churches can grow while still holding on to their cultural and generational identities, lies in the church leaders’ abilities to effectively exercise a unifying servant leadership approach.

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