

## **A Need for Lament Leadership in Asian Immigrant Ministry**

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### **Introduction: From the Experience of Asian Immigrants**

Definitions of leadership can vary according to specific leaders and communities. In particular, defining Asian immigrant leadership is not easy because Asian Immigrant leadership in ministry deals with the multi-layered backgrounds and situations of immigrants.<sup>1</sup> Asian immigrant leadership does not develop alone, but is a product of the interactions between the dynamics of different groups, and broader sociopolitical, religious and cultural dynamics.<sup>2</sup> In North America, colonial hegemony still exists, the distribution of power is unfair, and a dysfunctional social system breeds anger and oppression among immigrants. The constant struggle within Asia's hierarchical and patriarchal culture has further complicated the reality of these immigrants.<sup>3</sup> Asian Immigrant leadership has generally been understood only as a resistive and resilient “followership.”<sup>4</sup>

In 1882, the United States Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act to prevent Chinese immigrant laborers from taking jobs away from citizens.<sup>5</sup> There were some restrictions on immigration such as the Immigration and Nationality Act (McCarran-Walter Act) and the anti-miscegenation laws that prohibited Asian men from marrying white women.<sup>6</sup> After this racial barrier was somewhat removed by the Immigration and Nationality Act (Hart-Celler Act) of 1965, Asian Immigrant religious leaders emerged in various forms. However, barriers arising from cultural, identity, and social positions related to racism and citizenship continued to obstruct vibrant Asian immigrant leadership.<sup>7</sup> Although the socioeconomic status and income level of Asian immigrants was low, “the model minority myth” was used to justify the exclusion of Asian Americans.<sup>8</sup> The explosion of crime during the Pandemic, referred to as Asian Hatred, has brought to light the discrimination and hatred that continues to be inflicted on Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities. Collective racial trauma has repeatedly been inflicted throughout immigration history. A negative image of Asian Americans has been perpetuated. Russell Jeung mentions that the derogatory phrase “yellow peril” refers to the way white Americans have traditionally viewed the people of AAPI community as filthy, diseased, or unfit for citizenship. More broadly, Jeung refers to about the anti-Asian paranoia that permeated Western culture after

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<sup>1</sup> Hee An Choi, *A Postcolonial Leadership: Asian Immigrant Christian Leadership and Its Challenges* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2020), 181.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>5</sup> Russell Jeung, “It’s Been ‘A Litany of Lament.’ New Speaker Series Sheds Light on the History of Anti-Asian Hate,” *News@Northeastern* (September 28, 2021). <https://news.northeastern.edu/2021/09/28/shedding-light-on-anti-asian-hate/>

<sup>6</sup> Stacy Kitahata and Laura Cheifetz, “Forming Asian Leaders for North America,” in *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook vol.2*, ed. Sharon Henderson Callahan (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013): 712.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Jean Lau Chin, “Introduction: Special Section on Asian American Leadership,” *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 4, no. 4 (2013): 238.

the Enlightenment.<sup>9</sup> As such, the experience of Asian Immigrants in North America is closely related to the experience of suffering. Asian Immigrant leadership has situational requirements that cannot ignore the struggles and pains that are woven into life.

The dysfunctional system which has brought the suffering experience of immigrants need to be brought into the open and to be corrected, not just within the immigrant community, also throughout society in terms of the toleration of exploitation, oppression, and injustice against Asian Immigrant.<sup>10</sup> As Johan Cilliers puts it, “the church needs to beat with an aching heart against God’s heart’.” Asian Immigrant church leadership need to respond to the urgent issue of how to nurture resilience in the reality of life’s suffering.<sup>11</sup> In this context, lament can be a meaningful tool used by Asian Immigrant leadership in carrying out ministry.

## **Why Lament for Asian Immigrant Leadership in Ministry**

### **1. The Importance of Lament in Ministry**

Lament overturns the political process and narrative of growth and technological utterances which engage in heroic structures and pursue to exclude the marginalized.<sup>12</sup> Rather, lament reminds us that the social structure is predatory and dysfunctional and redirects the social gaze. Lament opens a transcendent future without ignoring or minimizing the reality of sorrow. Lament provides an entry point into the complexities of racism, temporarily setting aside various historical and structural causes, and providing a space to consider and mourn the effects of racism.<sup>13</sup> Lament can stop the denial and bring the truth to the surface, it helps us see our lives clearly and allows us to witness to ourselves, and overcome paralysis from trauma, oppression, and abuse.<sup>14</sup> Laments are the beginning of action.

Lament provides the most universal biblical testimony that reflects social dynamics and conflicts of all kinds. The biblical lamentation genre provides material and testimony to individuals and groups who attempt to cope with situations of conflict, setback, and failure in personal and community life.<sup>15</sup> Practicing lament in ministry aims to redistribute and reconstruct its dynamic between the Lamentor and God, and between the Lamentor and others, asking limiting questions of God and responding as co-workers and collaborators with God in a suffering world.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the lamenters provide resistance against the oppressor and allow genuine space for compassion.<sup>17</sup> Lament may guide Asian immigrant church leaders to extend and intersect with experiences of social stalemate, such as oppression, prejudice, and the church’s struggle for reform,

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<sup>9</sup> Russell Jeung, “It’s Been ‘A Litany of Lament.’ New Speaker Series Sheds Light on the History of Anti-Asian Hate,” *News@Northeastern* (September 28, 2021). <https://news.northeastern.edu/2021/09/28/shedding-light-on-anti-asian-hate/>

<sup>10</sup> Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1975), 36.

<sup>11</sup> Johan Cilliers, “Breaking the Syndrome of Silence: Finding Speech for Preaching in a Context of HIV and AIDS,” *Scriptura* 96 (2007): 395.

<sup>12</sup> Timothy Harvie, “Political Lament: Extinction, Grief, and Embodied Silence,” *Studies in Religion* 50, no. 3 (2021): 427.

<sup>13</sup> Denise Rector, “Race and the Gift of Lament,” *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* 60 (2021): 25.

<sup>14</sup> Kathleen M. O’Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 129.

<sup>15</sup> Bradford E. Hinze, “Ecclesial Impasse: What Can We Learn from Our Laments?” *Theological Studies* 72, no. 3 (2011): 477.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 478.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 479.

without limiting the Lamentations of the Bible to the realms of personal and spiritual life.<sup>18</sup> In a crisis situation, leadership is more likely to choose “the language of equilibrium” because to ensure “safety and security” it must contain or reject the primal edge of pain and chaos, especially when entangled in the political realm.<sup>19</sup> However, the language of lament is the political language against the language of power.<sup>20</sup> Lament is more than a mourning cry for despair, it transcends tears and frustration.

## **2. Definition of Lament Leadership in Asian Immigrant Ministry**

Leadership theories so far have been strongly influenced by North American values such as individualistic and heroic values that are taught in a White, Anglo, North American, heterosexual male biased view.<sup>21</sup> These tendencies may have deepened this exclusive relationship by meeting with the community-centered tendencies of Asia. Nonetheless, several approaches addressing Asian American Christian Leadership on the basis of mixed cultural identities have resulted in meaningful conversations about the expression and development of the voices and perspectives of Asian Christians in North America. Based on the stories of Asian and Asian Women Immigrants, Kwok Pui-lan argues that the Church of Jesus was formed by various colonial and postcolonial power groups, while at the same time it was challenged and recreated by those who were oppressed and colonized.<sup>22</sup> Grace Ji-sun Kim believes that the biblical Sophia is able to release Korean North American women's *han* and bring healing. She argues that the image of Jesus as Sophia must be reimagined in Korean women's traditions and Korean North American women's immigrant lives.<sup>23</sup> Boyung Lee presents a subversive community-based leadership that values united effort, dedication, and solidarity of the whole community beyond the voices of a few leaders, while, at the same time, it fights gender discrimination, an internalized colonial worldview, and patriarchy that is deeply rooted in diverse Asian cultures and religions.<sup>24</sup> Hee An Choi argues that the way Asian/Asian Immigrants understand and cope with suffering in an understandable way and the values that Asian Immigrants leaders need to embrace are closely related to “togetherness” and Jesus’ role as a co-sufferer.<sup>25</sup> These leadership considerations reveal how to deal with the suffering of Asian Immigrants, while, at the same time, attempting to cultivate the resilience of the community in a way that embraces wounds and divisions and forms a sense of solidarity, so that it can finally build a community based on interdependency.

Lament leadership follows these views. Lament leadership is formed on the basis of love and willingness to participate in suffering, not only for Asian Immigrants, but also for the powerless, the oppressed, and the excluded. It is leadership that challenges institutional authority and

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 486.

<sup>19</sup> Johan Cilliers, “Breaking the Syndrome of Silence: Finding Speech for Preaching in a Context of HIV and AIDS,” *Scriptura* 96 (2007): 394.

<sup>20</sup> Choan Seng Song, *The Tears of Lady Meng: A Parable of the People's Political Theology* (Geneva: The World Council of Churches, 1981), 38-45.

<sup>21</sup> Deanne N. Den Hartog and Marcus W. Dickson, “Leadership, Culture, and Globalization,” in *The Nature of Leadership*, eds. John Antonakis and David V. Day (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2018),

<sup>22</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 182-85.

<sup>23</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim, *The Grace of Sophia: A Korean North American Women's Christology* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Boyung Lee, “Subversive Leadership of Asian and Asian American Women,” in *Asian and Asian American Women in Theology and Religion*, ed by Kwok Pui-lan (Macmillan: Palgrave, 2020), 192-93.

<sup>25</sup> Choi, *A Postcolonial Leadership*, 142-43.

inequalities, and that embraces suffering from the memories and experiences of people's lives. Rather than having a clear leadership behavioral guideline, lament leadership remains flexible and open to situations of suffering and social situation, supporting people to live in harmony and dignity. Thus, Asian Immigrant lament leadership in ministry is concerned with spiritual, psychological, and physical realities. Lament leadership rejects hierarchical relationships, expects equal participation, and aims to make the language of the participants a common language through co-leadership and co-followship. So participation becomes important and the role of co-leadership is to invite all participants to the conversation with equal rights and encourage them to engage with each other, while cultivating interdependence.<sup>26</sup> In this sense, a leader who pursues lament leadership can work as a facilitator or moderator while focusing on promoting and safeguarding the participation in suffering.<sup>27</sup> Lament leadership would be helpful in facing pain today, and in dealing with suffering that faith communities and public have experienced beyond the context of Asian immigrants.

## **The Feature of Lament Leadership**

### **1. Trust Building through A Confessional Way of Conversation**

Lament can sometimes be a response to total loss of control and power. However, as a “partner and collaborator” with God, lament leadership face, acknowledge, and accept harm and devastation rather than focus on controlling them: “Lament is less about managing a crisis than descending into the depths of that crisis.”<sup>28</sup> Lament not only gives sufferers an opportunity to talk about what has happened to them, but also allows them to deal with the emotional component of suffering.<sup>29</sup> Lament unites people in pain and reveals them in their weakness.<sup>30</sup> Lament may be the only language that acknowledges the confusion of spirituality and leadership, not as a way to appease the disgruntled public and their criticism, but for genuine reconciliation.<sup>31</sup> June Dickie draws from her investigation about suffering the idea that those who sympathize most with complaint statements also identify the most confirmations of trust.<sup>32</sup> Just as the biblical self-confessed lament psalms give those who suffer the ability to freely acknowledge their helplessness, and the necessary words to embrace uncertainty, lament leadership seeks to help suffering people empathize and engage in each other's stories. It helps to build trusting relationships and ultimately promote change and healing.

Lament leadership works to sustain and build communities by focusing attention on the role of caring, with the view that we are relational human beings who participate in each other's lives, especially in each other's suffering. Lament emphasizes the importance of co-creation within the complexity of often conflicting perspectives, rather than bringing others together around a

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>27</sup> Chris Ansell and Alison Gash, “Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice,” *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 18, no. 4 (2007): 554.

<sup>28</sup> Edward Foley, “Leadership and Lament: Ritualizing a Roman Catholic Response to Abuse,” *Liturgy* 27, no. 4 (2012): 40.

<sup>29</sup> Dickie, “The Importance of Lament in Pastoral Ministry,” 4.

<sup>30</sup> A. R. Pete Diamond, Kathleen M. O'Connor, Louis Stulman, *Troubling Jeremiah* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1999), 400.

<sup>31</sup> Foley, “Leadership and Lament,” 45.

<sup>32</sup> Dickie, “The Importance of Lament in Pastoral Ministry,” 5.

common sustainable vision created by thoughtful leaders.<sup>33</sup> The individualistic tradition, justice ethics, and the priority of rationality over emotions have been advocated to reflect widely shared values in Western culture which may criticize lament leadership as being inefficient. However, the core value of lament leadership is care and commitment to maintaining it. Mutual trust and receptiveness are important as this requires humility to learn about others and is a way to relate to others in order to build and sustain an environment in which this care can thrive in lament leadership.

## **2. Presenting a Counter-Narrative**

According to Walter Brueggemann, the Old Testament is filled with voices that testify to the reality of God as it has been experienced by Israel.<sup>34</sup> Testimony functions as the primary evidence for events, thus it functions as a form of awareness and assurance for Israel. According to the testimony of Israel, God is the Almighty and who creates the world. God is a merciful God. Core-testimonies are overwhelmed by voices of counter-testimony such as the book of Lamentations. Counter-testimony raises a question about Israel's core-testimonies. This testimony originates from the gap between the reality of witnesses' lives and the characteristics of God that the witness has experienced and confessed. Israel's counter-testimony is, however, not an act of unbelief: but "it is rather a characteristic way in which faith is practiced."<sup>35</sup> In other words, the two actions can be completely different expressions of faith in God. Thus, the role of the complaint Psalms is not to be a voice of despair, but a voice asking for the reintegration with God, who has so far neglected Israel's situation. The Bible allows these voices and those of everyone who is suffering to be expressed through the voice of Israel. Thus, Israel's pain represents the story of every painful voice even beyond biblical times; those who have experienced wars, division, famine, despair, and every pain in life. Therefore, lament leadership offers a place of public lament, disclosure, resistance, and urgent calling. It helps us recognize the abyss and it draws upon the power of newness within the whole world.

In the public square, lament leadership can also present questions to the powers and can engage congregations in lamenting how social systems have alienated certain groups of people.<sup>36</sup> The social causes of human suffering contribute to the perpetuation of suffering and the marginalization of those who are already miserable.<sup>37</sup> The mission of lament leadership lies in relating to the needs of those who suffer, in which suffering persons who have been treated as victims or objects become the subject and have their agency restored. The transforming power of lament is not in the huge change that happens in a sufferer's life, but in the person re-experiencing the suffering as it is accepted, remembered, and witnessed.<sup>38</sup> Lament leadership which makes a counter-narrative creates room for individuals and communities to see and name injustice, as well

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<sup>33</sup> Jessica Nicholson and Elizabeth Kurucz, "Relational Leadership for Sustainability: Building an Ethical Framework from the Moral Theory of 'Ethics of Care'," *Journal of Business Ethics* 156, no. 1 (2017): 27.

<sup>34</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 144.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>36</sup> John McClure, *Ethical Approaches to Preaching: Choosing the Best Way to Preach About Difficult Issues* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2021), 68.

<sup>37</sup> Lee, "Subversive Leadership of Asian and Asian American Women," 191.

<sup>38</sup> Jaco J. Hamann, *When Steeples Cry: Leading Congregations through Loss and Change* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim, 2005), 123.

as bitterness and loss, by loudly and publicly announcing what has gone wrong.<sup>39</sup> Such leadership does not focus on what has gone wrong with us, but on what has been done to us.<sup>40</sup> Without the practice of lament leadership in faith communities and in public squares, “collective work for justice is blocked paralyzed, unable to begin.”<sup>41</sup>

### **3. Action of Interdependency**

Lament leadership may evoke interdependency in the experience of suffering. Interdependence fosters a desire to participate and a commitment to meaningful collaboration. Interdependency may complement the dichotomy of collectivism versus individualism in Eastern and Western cultures. Choi argues that there are three assumptions in the background of leadership<sup>42</sup>: 1) The superiority of the meaning of “better” in the word “lead”; 2) Dichotomous hierarchical relationship between leader and follower; 3) the assumption of leader as a singular form and follower as a plural form. Though the concept of leadership as a group of colleagues or collaborators has begun to come into the limelight, it still undervalues communal interdependence by increasing indifference and apathy, in which the individual “I” is central to leadership and “others” are followers.<sup>43</sup> Choi develops the concept of co-leader and co-follower based on the image of Jesus as a “co-sufferer.”<sup>44</sup> Lament leadership works in a similar way. A sincere individual lament can be a public lament, and a true witness is one who joins with others’ suffering to make one voice of lament even though folks are having different experiences. Individual lament and public lament cannot be separated from each other. However, the meaning of communal should be understood as the concept of multiple voices through inter-participation rather than one voice. To practice interdependency, lament leadership requires a careful listening attitude that respects participants’ presence and their ear for others who suffer.<sup>45</sup> This form of power sharing means that anyone in the community can invite anyone to a place to mourn and act, and it is the task of lament leadership to secure the space, attitude, atmosphere, and safety for all those who want to speak and act.

### **Conclusion:**

#### **Enacting Lament Leadership in Ministry for a Faith Community and its Society**

Since lament can often be considered as a status of those who are depressed, weak, and sometimes helpless, lament leadership seems to have no power to pursue the goals of the community or to develop it. However, lament is foundational to community and management of crisis for community building depends on people being able to trust each other. The purpose of the lament leadership is “the creation and restoration of the member of the community by the action of the group. The function is rehabilitation/restoration.”<sup>46</sup> For a faith community, a collective response to grief through a community lens by reflecting lament in the liturgy, sermons, and

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<sup>39</sup> O’Connor, *Lamentation and the Tears of the World*, 128.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Choi, *A Postcolonial Leadership*, 54-55.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 59-60.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>45</sup> Jaco J. Hamann, *When Steeples Cry: Leading Congregations through Loss and Change* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim, 2005), 83.

<sup>46</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Formfulness of Grief,” *Interpretation* 31, no. 3 (1977): 264-65.

community lives.<sup>47</sup> The practice of lament leadership in a faith community may offer “an opportunity to identify the historical antecedents, collective pain, to confess wrongdoing, to ask difficult questions related to injustice, to own misdeeds of an ecclesiology that settles for and reinforces the status quo, and to see God differently amid the suffering.”<sup>48</sup>

Asian American leadership needs to go beyond the liturgical need for mourning and to recognize the need for intentional practice in the public square and in their congregation’s lives. The experiences of suffering experienced by Asian immigrants in North America go beyond their personal and religious experiences and are tied to the larger society. Suffering exists in the lives of individuals in the Asian immigrant community regardless of their socioeconomic level, age, gender, religion, or political orientation. In this sense, it is difficult to be perceived as mere spiritual leadership because Asian Immigrant religious leaders are involved in social, political, cultural, and historical movements.<sup>49</sup> To respond to this situation, it is not enough to reserve space for lament only in the faith community. Sometimes, social services can be developed for the needs of Asian immigrants, and there are ways to use the specificity of immigrant identities to mediate the process between individual immigrants and institutionalized systems and to protect individual immigrants. In this process, the Asian Immigrant leadership can foster social capital.<sup>50</sup>

The particularity of Asian immigrant leadership is that they encounter the daily reality of real immigrants' lives and leaders are connected as mediators between people in relation to God, others, urban culture, generations at the intersection of race, gender, and ethnicity.<sup>51</sup> While addressing the unique needs of Asian immigrants, lament leadership can connect and work with other immigrant communities. These efforts are directed at those who suffer within the larger community, beyond merely ecclesial leadership where lament leadership hears, speaks about, testifies to, and resists causing pain. The justice and love sought in lament leadership need to arise from genuine connection with others, not from projections of one's own sadness or anger or excessive responsibility.<sup>52</sup>

Lament leadership can build an empirical basis for compassion and provide the resources for solidarity with those who suffer; can ignite a passion that urges us to live justly; and can motivate us to look beyond our own system of support and see another's suffering.<sup>53</sup> Lament leadership needs to be expanded as a way of life. This attitude toward life holds out hope but does not lose sight of the reality of pain. It calls not a list of things we wish for in the present, but a list that perhaps experiences hope in ways we didn't expect.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Sharon Prentis, “The Need for Lament,” *ANVIL: Journal of Theology and Mission* 36, no. 3 (2020): 43.

<sup>49</sup> Choi, *A Postcolonial Leadership*, xiii.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 170.

<sup>52</sup> O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World*, 132.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 132.