

Completing the Face of the Chinese Church in America

The ABC Handbook

Promoting Effective Ministries
to American-Born Chinese

Contributing Writers:

William L. Eng

Joseph C. Wong

Wayland Wong

David K. Woo

Peter Yuen

Fellowship of American Chinese Evangelicals (FACE)

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To purchase additional copies:

Fellowship of American Chinese Evangelicals
262 Rishell Dr.
Oakland, CA 94619
faceabc@aol.com

Part IV. The future of ABC ministries.

Chapter 10

Is There a Future Need for ABC Ministries?

By Joseph Wong

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- Relationships between OBC and ABC church leaders as equal partners.
- The future picture of ABC ministries.
- Asian American churches.
- Parallel ministries within an ethnic church.

ABC Ministries Are Essential for Future Immigrant Chinese Churches

“Change and decay all around I see,
O Thou who changes not, abide with me.”

The above portion of a hymn points out the contrast of life in this changing world with the constancy of God’s truth. Human and earthly change is always taking place around us. The business world recognizes this inevitability of change and tries to stay ahead of it by recognizing new trends and adapting to the new environment. Some businesses that were

slow to change used to be number one in sales in the U.S.; but now they are left behind by new upstarts who have far surpassed them.

No matter how much the American society changes, the immigrant Chinese churches will always have a need for ABC ministries. An irrefutable fact is that immigrants will birth and raise ABC children. Parental love and care for their children require an effective ministry to the ABCs in their churches. To commit that ministry to another church is to choose death for their church.

As long as the annual influx of Chinese immigrants continues to be in the tens of thousands, the immigrant church will flourish. Contributing to the growth of the immigrant churches is the immigrant's need for a social and community center, a gathering place for immigrants of the same culture, speaking the same language. Due to the gracious nature of Christianity, churches easily become care and help centers for those arriving in this country. But each immigrant church must not ignore their need to provide good ABC ministries.

Counsel and guidance are needed for these churches to understand and develop healthy ABC ministries as discussed in earlier chapters of this book. Should this not happen, these immigrant churches will have great difficulty surviving. Not only will there be the sad experience of seeing their children abandon the church, but also because of inadequate teaching, they will also see them even leave the faith of their parents. This has already been the experience of many in the Chinese churches in the United States and will continue to be so unless the Chinese churches give high priority to developing healthy ABC ministries. Chinese churches that have difficulty developing such ministries must seek outside counsel and guidance from churches having healthy ABC ministries.

Relationships between OBC and ABC Church Leaders as Equal Partners

A critical characteristic of future ABC ministries is the need for comradeship among the OBC and ABC church staff. It is not easy for the leadership of one culture to embrace the importance of a different culture in the church. However, the OBC leadership must take the initiative to seek out ABC leaders and welcome them into their church's life. Such a partnership must abandon the paternalistic pattern, where one group sees themselves as the parents and the others as children, or as teachers and

students. Still there is wisdom in seeking to learn from each other without the imposing of one view on the other.

Future Picture of ABC Ministries

Developing ABC ministries in the Chinese churches has been slow, and they face a catch-up condition as well. What the Chinese churches have done in the past in their ministry to ABCs, largely have not succeeded. This means that an evaluation of past efforts in order to improve them is only part of the process. Some rather forward thinking on the part of the church's leadership is needed to address the changing ABC culture. The ingredients used for a successful ministry in the past will provide insight into a future ministry that can be successful. But there are few examples of successful efforts in the past which leave the Chinese churches with a great challenge.

It is hoped that future development of ABC ministries can be dynamic and fruitful. Therefore, deliberate and large-scale efforts to recruit and train future pastors are essential. ABC seminarians must learn the pitfalls, as well as the ingredients in effective ABC ministries and not just learn to survive in a Chinese church. In the American society there has been a practice of relaxing the qualifications to give the people of a newer ethnic background the opportunity to catch up. This might be a practical approach to assist those inexperienced with the Chinese culture to gain expertise.

The future of ABC ministries will remain not only in immigrant churches. There already exists ABC churches which are ministering to third, fourth, and even fifth generation ABCs. Acculturated OBCs who have become comfortable in a Western style church life will also participate. In these churches the Chinese language will be unnecessary.

Since ABC churches will use only English, other Asians will also be attracted to these churches. In time these churches will attract Asian Americans in varying degrees. Other Americans of Asian origin will readily relate to an ABC church's life style. Their national and cultural identity is American while their racial roots will be Asian. It seems to be close enough for a common identity. The hostilities resulting from the history of their ancestral countries do not exist among the Asian Americans today.

Since the needs of Asian Americans have been neglected in the immigrant Asian churches, Asian American church leaders have planted churches that minister to English-speaking Asians. However, many of these new Asian American churches have a common weakness. What has developed are Asian American churches that have no relationship with a mother church or with any immigrant churches. They are missing the mature counsel and wisdom of the leaders from the established immigrant churches or a denomination.

By far, the greatest weakness of the Asian American church is its inability to minister to the needs of the Asian American's immigrant parents who are not comfortable with English. Asian American churches sometimes produce divided families where the children attend an English-speaking church while the parents attend a non-English-speaking one. Sometimes concerned Christians attending an Asian American church will call a pastor of an immigrant Asian church for help in reaching their immigrant parents. The challenge given to immigrant churches to be concerned for their ABCs is also valid for Asian American churches to be concerned for their immigrant parents.

In spite of these weaknesses in the Asian American church, it is a concept which has quickly caught on. The Asian American church possesses great potential. The unreached Asian American is an exploding community. It is probably true, that the future belongs to the Asian American church.

“ABC vs. Asian-American Ministries” by David Woo
(ABOUT FACE, Vol. 20, No. 1, February 1998)

I have noticed that many American-born Chinese seminarians or recent seminary graduates prefer to serve in Asian-American (by Asian-American I also mean multicultural) churches rather than Chinese churches. They have this interest for various reasons. Some of them do not want the extra hassle of working in a church with more than one language or culture. Others do not like the idea of working under an overseas-born Chinese senior pastor or OBC-controlled church board both of which may not be culturally sensitive to the needs of ABCs. Other

ABC seminarians and recent graduates look upon Asian-American ministries as the wave of the future, and consider ABC ministries today to be anachronistic, applicable to the 1960s but not to the 1990s. And there are those who have a legitimate call from the Lord to minister specifically to Asian Americans. The problem I want to address is whether ABC ministries are being neglected or overlooked today because they are seen as out-of-date while Asian American ministries are seen as being on the cutting edge.

Before I continue this article, I need to give you my own background in ministry so that you may know the perspective from which I write. I was born and raised in Los Angeles, attended a bilingual Chinese church from the age of eight, and was saved and active there for eighteen years until I graduated from seminary and moved from the area. Then I served as an associate pastor for seven years in a bilingual Chinese church in Chicago. From there I was involved in planting an Asian-American church in the north suburban area of Chicago in 1971. This church plant was possibly the first church founded in the United States specifically targeting Asian Americans. (If someone can inform me of a church planted before 1971 that was established specifically to target Asian Americans, I would like to know about it.) I served as the pastor in this Asian-American church for fifteen years. From there I was called to serve as an associate pastor in a bilingual Chinese church in Los Angeles where I served for six years. My present ministry in the Los Angeles area, where I have been serving for five years, is as the pastor of a multicultural congregation. In summary, I have served in Asian-American churches for twenty years and Chinese bilingual churches for twelve years.

First of all, I would have to say that there is a legitimate case for Asian-American ministries. I do not wish to denigrate this need. There are many unsaved Asians that cannot be reached by mono-ethnic churches and can only be reached through Asian-American works. More power to these ministries. May the Lord richly bless and multiply them through evangelism to the unsaved. (Church growth by transfer-growth is valid but I would much more rather see growth by evangelism.) May the Lord send

more workers into this harvest.

Although the case for Asian-American ministries is legitimate, I believe that more ABC seminarians and graduates should be open to the Lord calling them into ABC ministries. The case for ABC ministries is strong and valid. Here are a few reasons:

1. The number of Chinese bilingual churches looking for ABC workers far exceeds the need for workers in Asian-American ministries. Chinese churches throughout North America are looking for ABC workers while Asian-American ministries are few in number and primarily centered on the West Coast.

2. Some Asian-American churches tend to minister to the dropouts from the Chinese churches. But by the time these Christians leave the Chinese churches, many of them have been so turned off that they are extremely difficult to reach even by the Asian-American churches. Why not strengthen the ministries to the ABCs while they are in the Chinese churches rather than wait until the damage is done and then try to pick up the pieces? Let's correct the problem at its source.

3. Many ABC seminarians and graduates are products of Chinese churches. They know firsthand the needs and opportunities in the Chinese churches and are the most suitable ones to minister in these situations. Could the Lord be calling so many of them away from ABC ministries? Perhaps the Lord has His ways, but I wonder about it.

4. ABC ministries by and large tend to be more difficult than Asian-American ministries because most ABC ministries take place in the context of a bilingual church, unless one serves in a church specifically planted for ABCs. Should the degree of difficulty be the measure of God's call? Does the Lord not call people to leave easier ministries to go into more difficult ones?

5. *ABC seminarians and graduates who were saved and nurtured in OBC churches have managed to survive the many barriers that have caused many ABCs to drop out of the OBC churches. These survivors have hearts of compassion for those remaining. Do we who managed to survive now pull up the rope and walk away saying to those remaining, “I survived on my own; now you do the same”? I do not want to accuse ABC pastors who do not serve in Chinese churches as being deserters because the Lord calls each into a particular ministry, and I must not question whom the Lord calls into what ministry. It is between each person and the Lord. But I would wish that more ABC pastors, having come out of OBC churches and having a heart of compassion for the ABCs in those churches, would be moved to serve among them.*

6. *Today, the Chinese churches are filled with ABC children and young people who are much in need of sensitive pastoral leadership. Do we write them off? Do we say to them, “You are not a part of the wave of the future”?*

The title of this article is a misnomer. There is not a conflict between ABC and Asian-American ministries. Both are valid ministries, and the Lord calls people to both. Let us rejoice and celebrate with those whom the Lord has called to each – while not forgetting the ABC part.

Parallel Ministries within the Chinese Church

Few, if any, immigrant churches of Asian ancestry have caught the vision to start English-speaking versions of their ethnic churches, much less start Asian American churches. Though such a situation is unfortunate, it is understandable. The immigrant church is so concerned for her immediate needs, that many of them have over-looked the other need in the Chinese populace, the ABCs. These also are the children of earlier immigrants who have yet to come to Christ.

Are the Chinese churches in North America able to address this challenge? Will they acquire a vision for this ministry? It will happen when some church leaders are able to lift up their eyes to this need and

realize it is a ripe harvest field. The challenge will not be simply reaching and discipling ABCs, but reaching and discipling Asian Americans as well.

The future of ABC ministries is NOW! May the churches in the U.S. that minister to immigrants in Korean, Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Vietnamese, etc., catch the vision for Asian American churches and consider taking on the responsibility for establishing them. A characteristic of being a biblical Christian is learning to look beyond one's personal needs and in love, undertake the task of meeting the needs of others. It is time for the Chinese churches to look into her role for the future of ABC ministries.

The developing Asian American or ABC churches are themselves faced with the significant question that was addressed above, "How shall we minister to the immigrant parents of our Asian American members?" Leaving that ministry to the immigrant churches will result in dividing the families. This problem confronts the Chinese churches in America, whether they are ABC or OBC churches. Is it acceptable to be a mono-cultural church while dividing the bi-cultural Chinese families?

An ABC church can theoretically ignore the OBC culture by ministering to second, third and later generations Chinese in America. Some first generation Chinese who were raised in America may find these churches comfortable. Still, it is not improbable that ABC young people who are being evangelized, will have parents who find it very difficult to fit into an ABC church.

FACE recommends that although the planting of Asian American churches are viable options, the Chinese churches in America should give their first priority to providing parallel ministries to OBCs and ABCs within their churches. In time, perhaps there will be a significant lessening of the need to minister to immigrants. But for the foreseeable future, the need for Chinese churches with parallel ministries will remain and is the ideal church structure for providing suitable ministries to both OBCs and ABCs.